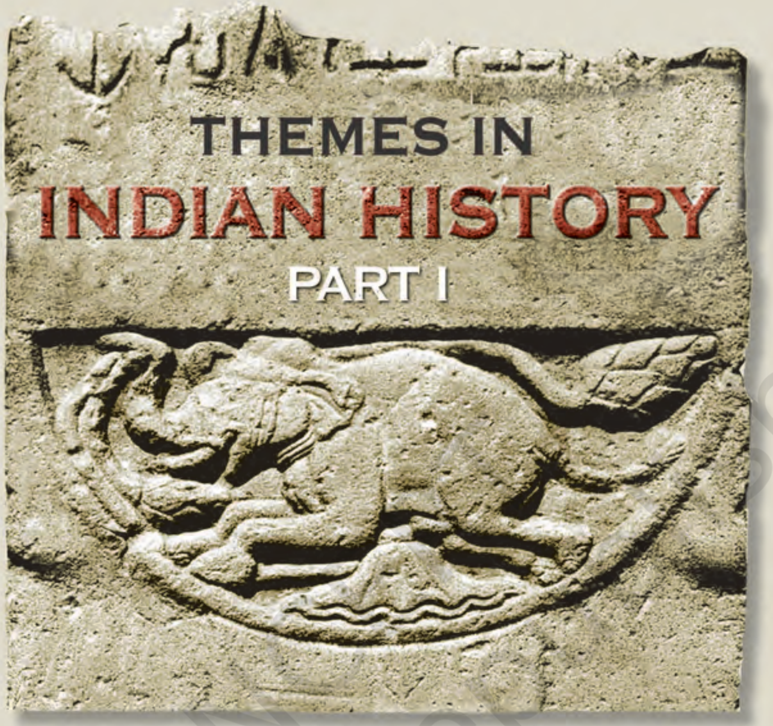
Textbook in History
for Class XII



THEMES IN
INDIAN HISTORY
PART I

12093

विद्ययाऽमृतमश्नुते

एन सी ई आर टी
NCERT

राष्ट्रीय शैक्षिक अनुसंधान और प्रशिक्षण परिषद्
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FOREWORD

The *National Curriculum Framework* (NCF), 2005, recommends that children's life at school must be linked to their life outside the school. This principle marks a departure from the legacy of bookish learning which continues to shape our system and causes a gap between the school, home and community. The syllabi and textbooks developed on the basis of NCF signify an attempt to implement this basic idea. They also attempt to discourage rote learning and the maintenance of sharp boundaries between different subject areas. We hope these measures will take us significantly further in the direction of a child-centred system of education outlined in the *National Policy on Education* (1986).

The success of this effort depends on the steps that school principals and teachers will take to encourage children to reflect on their own learning and to pursue imaginative activities and questions. We must recognise that, given space, time and freedom, children generate new knowledge by engaging with the information passed on to them by adults. Treating the prescribed textbook as the sole basis of examination is one of the key reasons why other resources and sites of learning are ignored. Inculcating creativity and initiative is possible if we perceive and treat children as participants in learning, not as receivers of a fixed body of knowledge.

These aims imply considerable change in school routines and mode of functioning. Flexibility in the daily time-table is as necessary as rigour in implementing the annual calendar so that the required number of teaching days are actually devoted to teaching. The methods used for teaching and evaluation will also determine how effective this textbook proves for making children's life at school a happy experience, rather than a source of stress or boredom. Syllabus designers have tried to address the problem of curricular burden by restructuring and reorienting knowledge at different stages with greater consideration for child psychology and the time available for teaching. The textbook attempts to enhance this endeavour by giving higher priority and space to opportunities for contemplation and wondering, discussion in small groups, and activities requiring hands-on experience.

The National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) appreciates the hard work done by the textbook development committee responsible for this book. We wish to thank the Chairperson of the advisory group in Social Sciences Professor Hari Vasudevan and the Chief Advisor for this book, Professor Neeladri Bhattacharya, Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi for guiding the work of this committee. Several teachers contributed to the development of this textbook; we are grateful to their principals for making this possible. We are indebted to the institutions and organisations which have generously permitted us to draw upon their resources, material and personnel. We are especially grateful to the members of the National Monitoring Committee, appointed by the Department of Secondary and Higher Education, Ministry of Human Resource Development under the Chairpersonship of Professor Mrinal Miri and Professor G.P. Deshpande, for their valuable time and contribution. As an organisation committed to the systemic reform and continuous improvement in the quality of its products, NCERT welcomes comments and suggestions which will enable us to undertake further revision and refinement.

Director
National Council of Educational
Research and Training

New Delhi
20 November 2006

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RATIONALISATION OF CONTENT IN THE TEXTBOOKS

In view of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is imperative to reduce content load on students. The National Education Policy 2020, also emphasises reducing the content load and providing opportunities for experiential learning with creative mindset. In this background, the NCERT has undertaken the exercise to rationalise the textbooks across all classes. Learning Outcomes already developed by the NCERT across classes have been taken into consideration in this exercise.

Contents of the textbooks have been rationalised in view of the following:

- Overlapping with similar content included in other subject areas in the same class
- Similar content included in the lower or higher class in the same subject
- Difficulty level
- Content, which is easily accessible to students without much interventions from teachers and can be learned by children through self-learning or peer-learning
- Content, which is irrelevant in the present context

This present edition, is a reformatted version after carrying out the changes given above.

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DEFINING THE FOCUS OF STUDY

What defines the focus of this book? What does it seek to do? How is it linked to what has been studied in earlier classes?

In Classes VI to VIII we looked at Indian history from early beginnings to modern times, with a focus on one chronological period in each year. Then in the books for Classes IX and X, the frame of reference changed. We looked at a shorter period of time, focusing specifically on a close study of the contemporary world. We moved beyond territorial boundaries, beyond the limits of nation states, to see how different people in different places have played their part in the making of the modern world. The history of India became connected to a wider inter-linked history. Subsequently in Class XI we studied *Themes in World History*, expanding our chronological focus, looking at the vast span of years from the beginning of human life to the present, but selecting only a set of themes for serious exploration. This year we will study *Themes in Indian History*.

The book begins with Harappa and ends with the framing of the Indian constitution. What it offers is not a general survey of five millennia, but a close study of select themes. The history books in earlier years have already acquainted you with Indian history. It is time we explore some themes in greater detail.

In choosing the themes we have tried to ensure that we learn about developments in different spheres – economic, cultural, social, political, and religious – even as we attempt to break the boundaries between them. Some themes in the book will introduce you to the politics of the time and the nature of authority and power; others explore the way societies are organised, and the way they function and change; still others tell us about religious life and ritual practices, about the working of economies, and the changes within rural and urban societies.

Each of these themes will also allow you to have a closer look at the historians' craft. To retrieve the past, historians have to find sources that make the past accessible. But sources do not just reveal the past; historians have to grapple with sources, interpret them, and make them speak. This is what makes history exciting. The same sources can tell us new things if we ask new questions, and engage with them in new ways. So we need to see how historians read sources, and how they discover new things in old sources.

But historians do not only re-examine old records. They discover new ones. Sometimes these could be chance discoveries. Archaeologists may unexpectedly come across seals and mounds that provide clues to the existence of a site of an ancient civilisation. Rummaging through the dusty records of a district collectorate a historian may trip over a bundle of records that contain legal cases of local disputes, and these may open up a new world of village life several centuries back. Yet are such discoveries only accidents? You may bump into a bundle of old records in an archive, open it up and see it, without discovering the significance of the source. The source may mean nothing to you unless you have relevant questions in mind. You have to track the source, read the text, follow the clues, and make the inter-connections before you can reconstruct the past. The physical discovery of a record does not simply open up the past. When Alexander Cunningham first saw a Harappan seal, he could make no sense of it. Only much later was the significance of the seals discovered.

In fact when historians begin to ask new questions, explore new themes, they have to often search for new types of sources. If we wish to know about revolutionaries and rebels, official sources can reveal only a partial picture, one that will be shaped by official censure and prejudice. We need to look for other sources – diaries of rebels, their personal letters, their writings and pronouncements. And these are not always easy to come by. If we have to understand experiences of people, then oral sources might reveal more than written sources.

As the vision of history broadens, historians begin tracking new sources, searching for new clues to understand the past. And when that happens, the conception of what constitutes a source itself changes. There was a time when only written records were acknowledged as authentic. What was written could be verified, cited, and cross checked. Oral evidence was never considered a valid source: who was to guarantee its authenticity and verifiability? This mistrust of oral sources has not yet disappeared, but oral evidence has been innovatively used to uncover experiences that no other record could reveal.

Through the book this year, you will enter the world of historians, accompany them in their search for new clues, and see how they carry on their dialogues with the past. You will witness the way they tease out meaning out of records, read inscriptions, excavate archaeological sites, make sense of beads and bones, interpret the epics, look at the stupas and buildings, examine paintings and photographs, interpret police reports and revenue records, and listen to the voices of the past. Each theme will explore the peculiarities and possibilities of one particular type of source. It will discuss what a source can tell and what it cannot.

This is Part I of *Themes in Indian History,* Parts II and III will follow.

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Several people commented extensively on draft chapters, helping us improve on the text and clarify issues. We are particularly grateful to our young readers, Meera and Sandhya Visvanathan whose suggestions and comments helped us sharpen the presentation, and to Baisakh Chakrabarti for his encouragement. The suggestions of the members of the Monitoring Committee, Prof. J. S. Grewal and Ms Shobha Bajpai, were very useful.

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Ms Shyama Warner copyedited and proof read the book while Ms Ritu Topa and Mr. Animesh Roy of Arrt Creations, New Delhi, designed it. We would like to thank them all for the patience, care, and passion they brought to the task.

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Finally, we look forward to feedback from the users of the book, which will help us improve it in subsequent editions.

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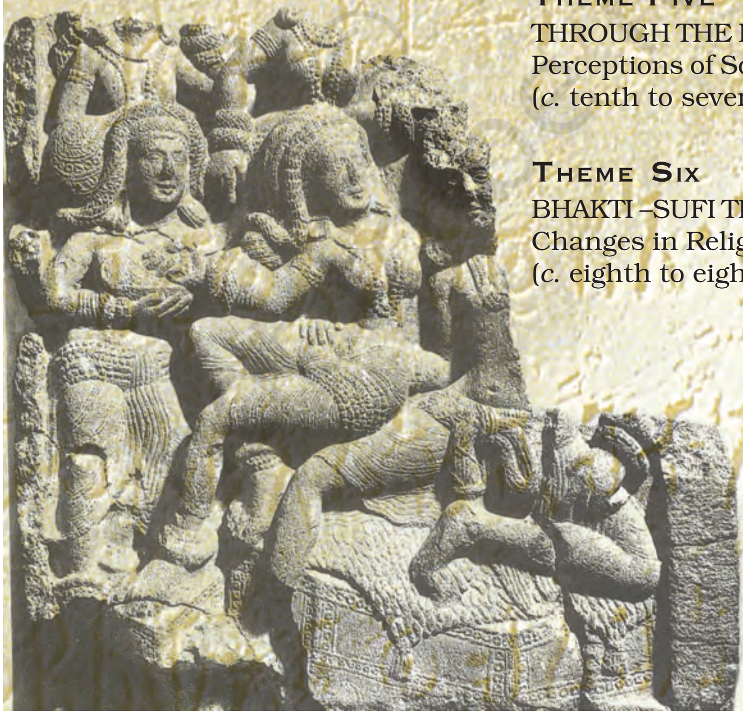

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**Parts II and III will follow*

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This is Part I of *Themes in Indian History*, Parts II and III will follow.

☑ Each chapter is divided into numbered sections and subsections to facilitate learning.

☑ You will also find other material enclosed in boxes.

These contain:

Short meanings

Additional Information

More elaborate definitions

These are meant to assist and enrich the learning process, but are ***not intended for evaluation.***

☑ Each chapter ends with a set of ***timelines***. This is to be treated as background information, and ***not for evaluation***.

☑ There are ***figures, maps*** and ***sources*** numbered sequentially through each chapter.

(a) **Figures** include illustrations of artefacts such as tools, pottery, seals, coins, ornaments etc. as well as of inscriptions, sculpture, paintings, buildings, archaeological sites, plans and photographs of people and places; visual material that historians use as sources.

(b) Each chapter has **maps**.

Sources

(c) **Sources** are enclosed within separate boxes: these contain excerpts from a wide variety of texts and inscriptions. Both visual and textual sources will help you acquire a feel for the clues that historians use. You will also see how historians analyse these clues. **The final examination can include excerpts from and/or illustrations of identical/similar material, providing you with an opportunity to handle these.**

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☑ There are *two* categories of ***intext questions:***

(a) those within a yellow box, which may be used for practice for ***evaluation***.

(b) those with the caption ➲ Discuss… which are ***not for evaluation***

☑ There are ***four types*** of assignments at the end of each chapter:
These include:

short questions

short essays

map work

projects

These are meant to provide practice for the final assessment and evaluation.

Hope you enjoy using this book.

12093CH01

THEME ONE

BRICKS, BEADS AND BONES

THE HARAPPAN CIVILISATION

The Harappan seal (Fig.1.1) is possibly the most distinctive artefact of the Harappan or Indus valley civilisation. Made of a stone called steatite, seals like this one often contain animal motifs and signs from a script that remains undeciphered. Yet we know a great deal about the lives of the people who lived in the region from what they left behind – their houses, pots, ornaments, tools and seals – in other words, from archaeological evidence. Let us see *what* we know about the Harappan civilisation, and *how* we know about it. We will explore *how* archaeological material is interpreted and *how* interpretations sometimes change. Of course, there are some aspects of the civilisation that are as yet unknown and may even remain so.

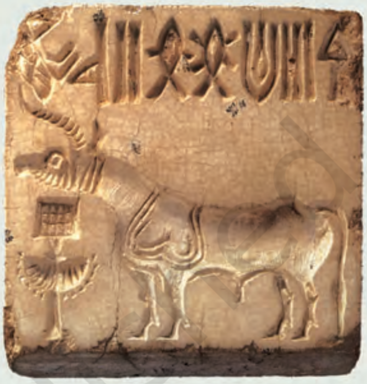


Fig. 1.1
A Harappan seal

Terminologies, Places and Time

"The Harappan Civilisation" is also known as the Indus Valley Civilisation. The term Harappa is derived from the place where the civilization was identified. The total time span of the civilisation ranges from 6000 BCE to 1300 BCE. The early phase, termed as Early Harappan (6000 BCE-2600 BCE) is a formative phase of the civilisation. The urban phase of the civilisation, termed as Mature Harappan (2600 BCE-1900 BCE) is the most prosperous phase. The decline of the civilisation starts around 1900 BCE. This decadent phase (1900 BCE-1300 BCE) is termed as Late Harappan.

The distinctive Harappan pottery, bricks (baked and unbaked) seals, weights, beads, copper and bronze articles, belonging to the Harappan civilisation have been found in the region, as apart as Afghanistan, Baluchistan, Sind and Punjab provinces of Pakistan and the Indian States of Jammu and Kashmir, Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat and Maharashtra (Map 1).

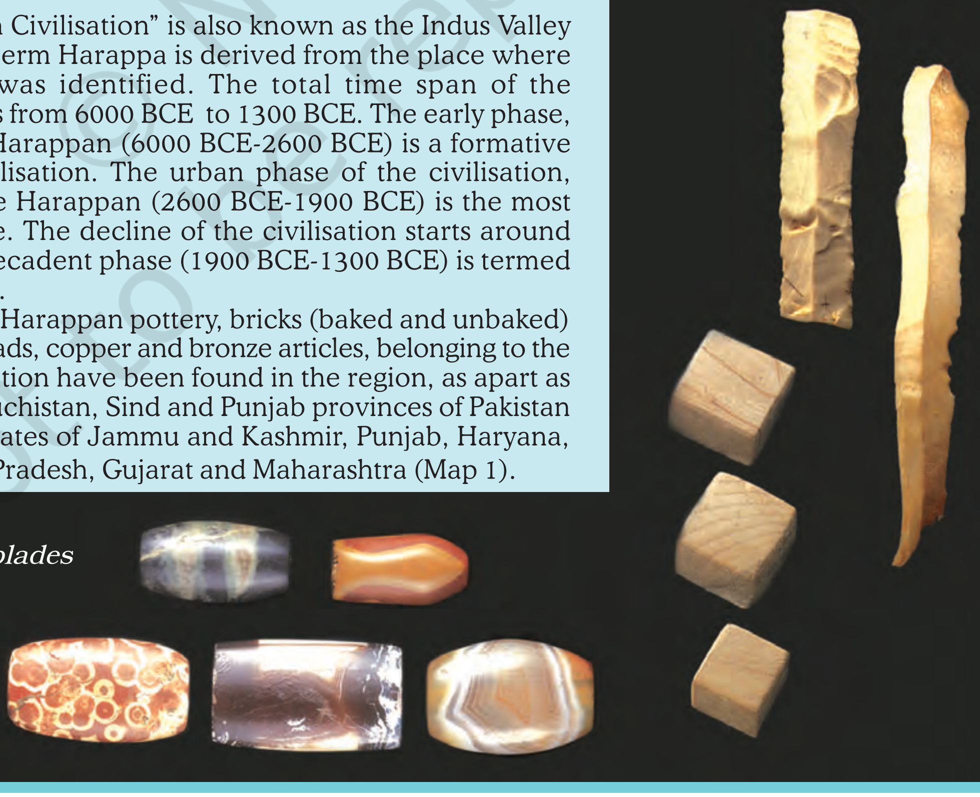
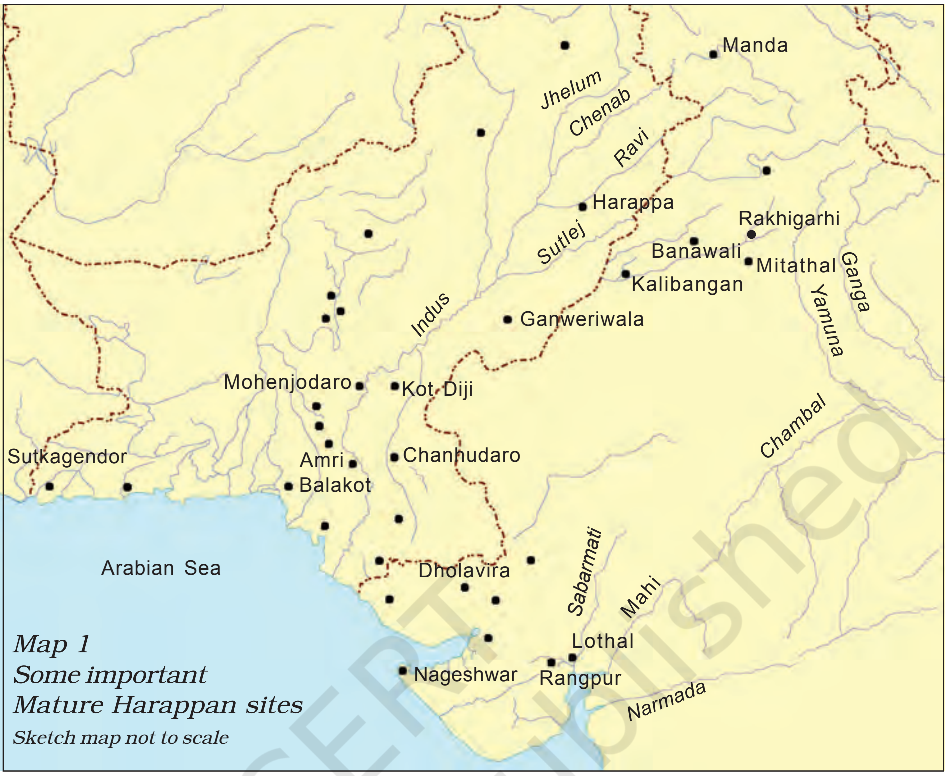


Fig. 1.2
Beads, weights, blades


Manda
Jhelum
Chenab
Ravi
Harappa
Rakhigarhi
Sutlej
Banawali
Mitathal
Ganga
Kalibangan
Yamuna
Indus
Ganweriwala
Mohenjodaro
Kot Diji
Chambal
Sutkagendor
Amri
Chanhudaro
Balakot
Arabian Sea
Dholavira
Sabarmati
Mahi
Lothal
Nageshwar
Rangpur
Narmada

Map 1
Some important Mature Harappan sites
Sketch map not to scale

You will find certain abbreviations, related to dates, in this book.

BP stands for Before Present

BCE stands for Before Common Era

CE stands for the Common Era. The present year is 2015 according to this dating system.

c. stands for the Latin word circa and means "approximate."

Harappan Settlements

So far, more than 2000 Harappan archaeological sites have been discovered in the Indian sub-continent. Most of the sites are found located between The Indus and The Saraswati river basins. Nearly two-thirds of these settlements are in the Saraswati basin, suggesting its immense importance for the Harappan Civilisation. Among these, five major cities have been identified. These are Rakhigarhi, Mohenjodaro, Harappa, Dholavira and Ganweriwala. The remaining sites come under different categories such as Regional Centres, agricultural villages, ports and manufacturing centres.

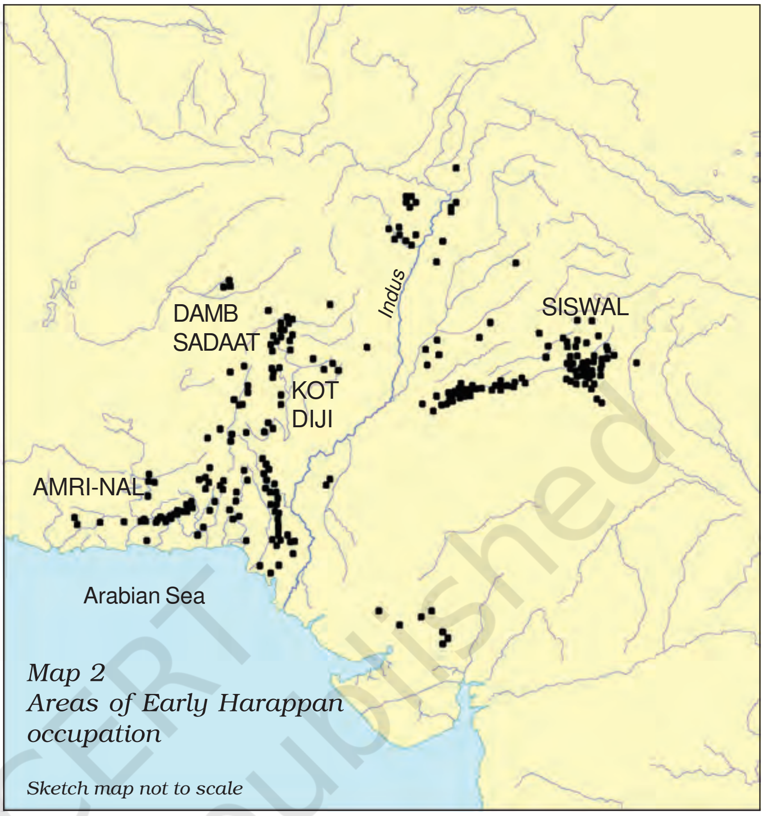
1. BEGINNINGS

There were several archaeological cultures in the region prior to the Mature Harappan. These cultures were associated with distinctive pottery, evidence of agriculture and pastoralism, and some crafts. Settlements were generally small, and there were virtually no large buildings. The recent archaeological evidences also indicate the emergence of Harappan culture from early farming communities dated around 7000 BCE. The urban phase (Mature Harappan) was a consequent result of the gradual transformation and internal development of the civilisation during the early Harappan phase.

2. SUBSISTENCE STRATEGIES

If you look at Maps 1 and 2 you will notice that the Mature Harappan culture developed in some of the areas occupied by the Early Harappan cultures. These cultures also shared certain common elements including subsistence strategies. The Harappans ate a wide range of plant and animal products, including fish. Archaeologists have been able to reconstruct dietary practices from finds of charred grains and seeds. These are studied by archaeo-botanists, who are specialists in ancient plant remains. Grains found at Harappan sites include wheat, barley, lentil, chickpea and sesame. Millets are found from sites in Gujarat. Finds of rice are relatively rare.

Animal bones found at Harappan sites include those of cattle, sheep, goat, buffalo and pig. Studies done by archaeo-zoologists or zoo-archaeologists indicate that these animals were domesticated. Bones of wild species such as boar, deer and *gharial* are also found. We do not know whether the Harappans hunted these animals themselves or obtained meat from other hunting communities. Bones of fish and fowl are also found.



Map 2
Areas of Early Harappan occupation

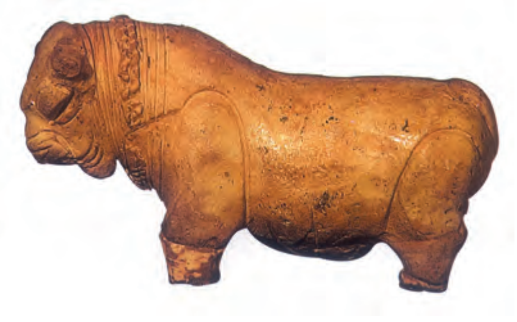
Sketch map not to scale

2.1 Agricultural technologies

While the prevalence of agriculture is indicated by finds of grain, it is more difficult to reconstruct actual agricultural practices. Were seeds broadcast (scattered) on ploughed lands? Representations on seals and terracotta sculpture indicate that the bull was known, and archaeologists extrapolate from this that oxen were used for ploughing. Moreover, terracotta models of the plough have been found at sites in Cholistan and at Banawali (Haryana). Archaeologists have also found evidence of a ploughed field at Kalibangan (Rajasthan), associated with Early Harappan levels (see p. 20). The field had two sets of furrows at right angles to each other, suggesting that two different crops were grown together.

Archaeologists have also tried to identify the tools used for harvesting. Did the Harappans use stone blades set in wooden handles or did they use metal tools?

Fig. 1.3
A terracotta bull



➲ Discuss...

Are there any similarities or differences in the distribution of settlements shown on Maps 1 and 2?

Most Harappan sites are located in semi-arid lands, where irrigation was probably required for agriculture. Traces of canals have been found at the Harappan site of Shortughai in Afghanistan, but not in Punjab or Sind. It is possible that ancient

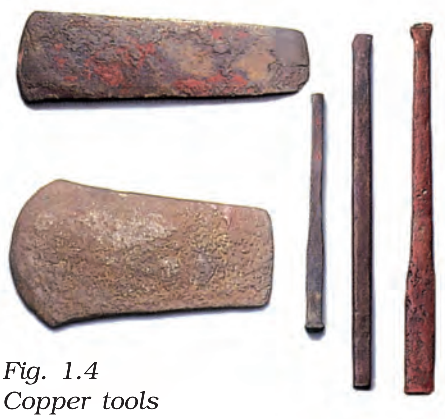
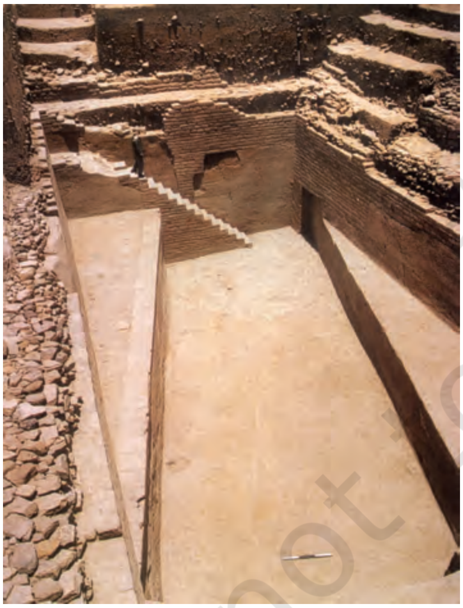


Fig. 1.4
Copper tools

➲ Do you think these tools could have been used for harvesting?

Fig. 1.5
Reservoir at Dholavira
Note the masonry work.



➲ Discuss...

What is the evidence used by archaeologists to reconstruct dietary practices?

canals silted up long ago. It is also likely that water drawn from wells was used for irrigation. Besides, water reservoirs found in Dholavira (Gujarat) may have been used to store water for agriculture.

Source 1

How artefacts are identified

Processing of food required grinding equipment as well as vessels for mixing, blending and cooking. These were made of stone, metal and terracotta. This is an excerpt from one of the earliest reports on excavations at Mohenjodaro, the best-known Harappan site:

> Saddle querns … are found in considerable numbers … and they seem to have been the only means in use for grinding cereals. As a rule, they were roughly made of hard, gritty, igneous rock or sandstone and mostly show signs of hard usage. As their bases are usually convex, they must have been set in the earth or in mud to prevent their rocking. Two main types have been found: those on which another smaller stone was pushed or rolled to and fro, and others with which a second stone was used as a pounder, eventually making a large cavity in the nether stone. Querns of the former type were probably used solely for grain; the second type possibly only for pounding herbs and spices for making curries. In fact, stones of this latter type are dubbed "curry stones" by our workmen and our cook asked for the loan of one from the museum for use in the kitchen.
>
> FROM ERNEST MACKAY, *Further Excavations at Mohenjodaro*, 1937.

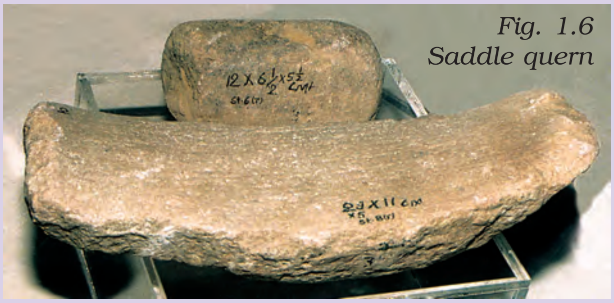


Fig. 1.6
Saddle quern

➲ Archaeologists use present-day analogies to try and understand what ancient artefacts were used for. Mackay was comparing present-day querns with what he found. Is this a useful strategy?

3. MOHANJODARO
A PLANNED URBAN CENTRE

Perhaps the most unique feature of the Harappan civilisation was the development of urban centres. Let us look at one such centre, Mohenjodaro, more closely. Although Mohenjodaro is the most well-known site, the first site to be discovered was Harappa.

The settlement is divided into two sections, one smaller but higher and the other much larger but

➲ How is the Lower Town different from the Citadel?

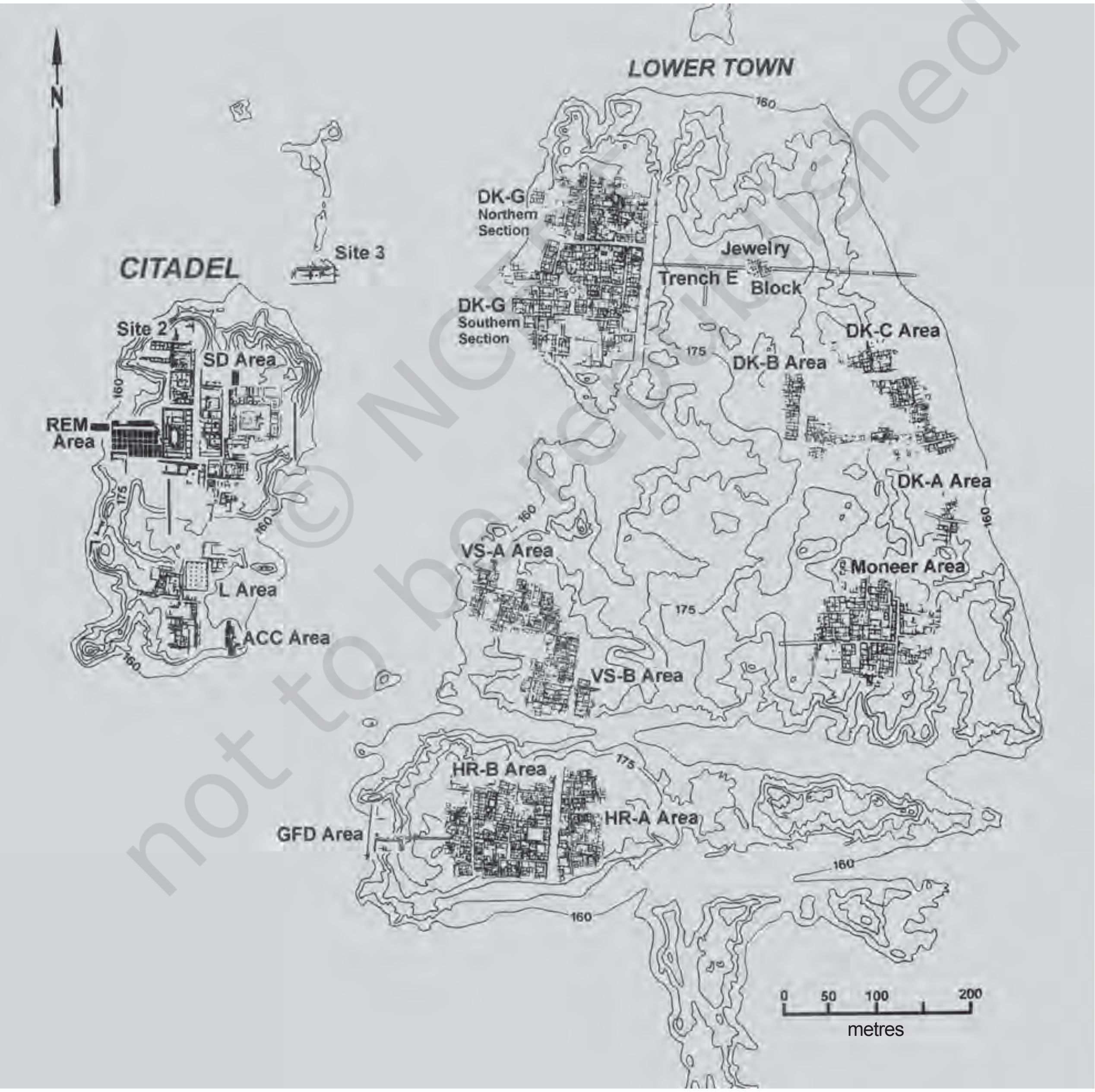

N
LOWER TOWN
CITADEL
Site 3
Site 2
SD Area
REM Area
L Area
ACC Area
DK-G Northern Section
DK-G Southern Section
Trench E
Jewelry Block
DK-C Area
DK-B Area
DK-A Area
Moneer Area
VS-A Area
VS-B Area
HR-B Area
HR-A Area
GFD Area
160
175
0 50 100 200
metres

Fig. 1.7
Layout of Mohenjodaro

lower. Archaeologists designate these as the Citadel and the Lower Town respectively. The Citadel owes its height to the fact that buildings were constructed on mud brick platforms. It was walled, which meant that it was physically separated from the Lower Town.

The Lower Town was also walled. Several buildings were built on platforms, which served as foundations. It has been calculated that if one labourer moved roughly a cubic metre of earth daily, just to put the foundations in place it would have required four million person-days, in other words, mobilising labour on a very large scale.

Consider something else. Once the platforms were in place, all building activity within the city was restricted to a fixed area on the platforms. So it seems that the settlement was first planned and then implemented accordingly. Other signs of planning include bricks, which, whether sun-dried or baked, were of a standardised ratio, where the length and breadth were four times and twice the height respectively. Such bricks were used at all Harappan settlements.

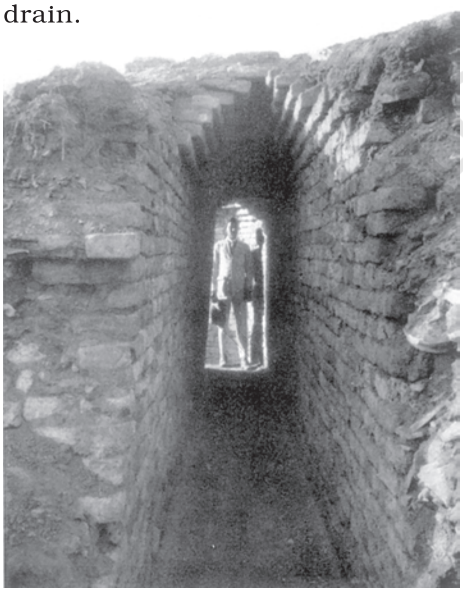
3.1 Laying out drains

One of the most distinctive features of Harappan cities was the carefully planned drainage system. If you look at the plan of the Lower Town you will notice that roads and streets were laid out along an approximate "grid" pattern, intersecting at right angles. It seems that streets with drains were laid out first and then houses built along them. If domestic waste water had to flow into the street drains, every house needed to have at least one wall along a street.

The plight of Harappa

Although Harappa was the first site to be discovered, it was badly destroyed by brick robbers. As early as 1875, Alexander Cunningham, the first Director-General of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), often called the father of Indian archaeology, noted that the amount of brick taken from the ancient site was enough to lay bricks for "about 100 miles" of the railway line between Lahore and Multan. Thus, many of the ancient structures at the site were damaged. In contrast, Mohenjodaro was far better preserved.

Fig. 1.8
A drain in Mohenjodaro
Notice the huge opening of the drain.



Citadels

While most Harappan settlements have a small high western part and a larger lower eastern section, there are variations. At sites such as Dholavira and Lothal (Gujarat), the entire settlement was fortified, and sections within the town were also separated by walls. The Citadel within Lothal was not walled off, but was built at a height.

3.2 Domestic architecture

The Lower Town at Mohenjodaro provides examples of residential buildings. Many were centred on a courtyard, with rooms on all sides. The courtyard was probably the centre of activities such as cooking and weaving, particularly during hot and dry weather. What is also interesting is an apparent concern for privacy: there are no windows in the walls along the ground level. Besides, the main entrance does not give a direct view of the interior or the courtyard.

Every house had its own bathroom paved with bricks, with drains connected through the wall to the street drains. Some houses have remains of staircases to reach a second storey or the roof. Many houses had wells, often in a room that could be reached from the outside and perhaps used by passers-by. Scholars have estimated that the total number of wells in Mohenjodaro was about 700.

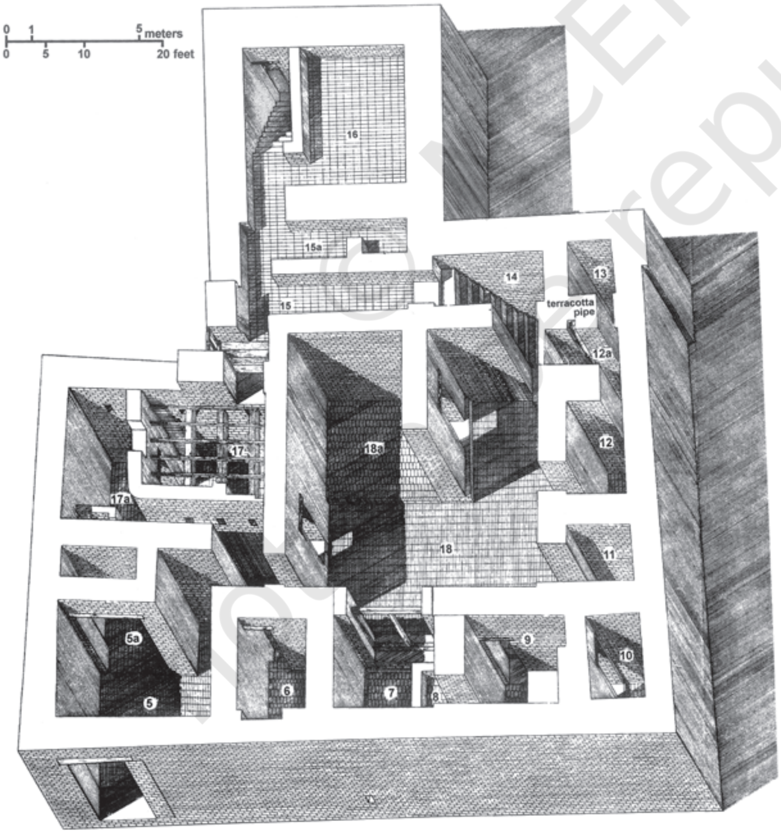


Fig. 1.9
This is an isometric drawing of a large house in Mohenjodaro. There was a well in room no 6.

➲ Where is the courtyard? Where are the two staircases? What is the entrance to the house like?

Source 2

The most ancient system yet discovered

About the drains, Mackay noted: "It is certainly the most complete ancient system as yet discovered." Every house was connected to the street drains. The main channels were made of bricks set in mortar and were covered with loose bricks that could be removed for cleaning. In some cases, limestone was used for the covers. House drains first emptied into a sump or cesspit into which solid matter settled while waste water flowed out into the street drains. Very long drainage channels were provided at intervals with sumps for cleaning. It is a wonder of archaeology that "little heaps of material, mostly sand, have frequently been found lying alongside drainage channels, which shows … that the debris was not always carted away when the drain was cleared".

FROM ERNEST MACKAY, *Early Indus Civilisation*, 1948.

Drainage systems were not unique to the larger cities, but were found in smaller settlements as well. At Lothal for example, while houses were built of mud bricks, drains were made of burnt bricks.

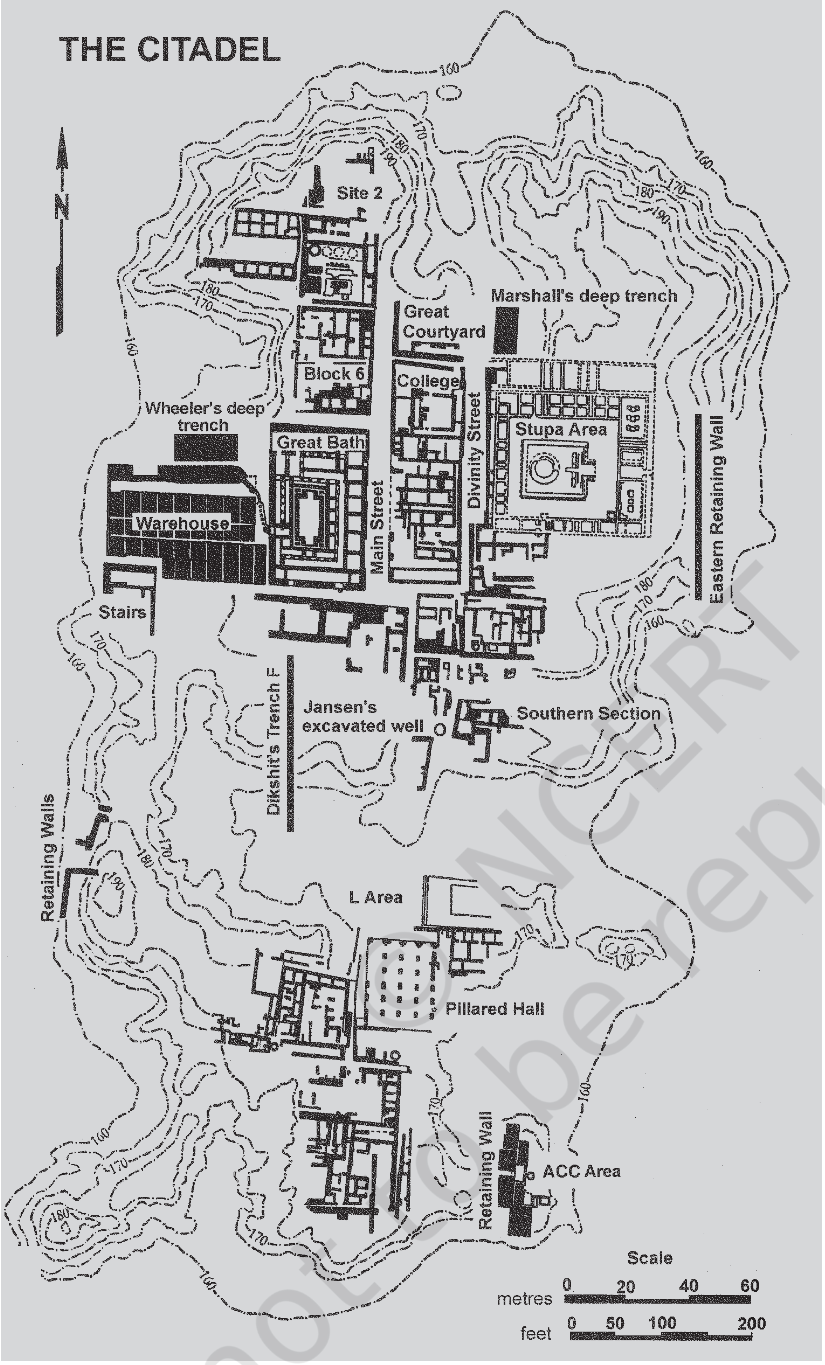

THE CITADEL
N
Site 2
Marshall's deep trench
Great Courtyard
Block 6
College
Wheeler's deep trench
Great Bath
Stupa Area
Divinity Street
Main Street
Eastern Retaining Wall
Warehouse
Stairs
Dikshit's Trench F
Jansen's excavated well
Southern Section
Retaining Walls
L Area
Pillared Hall
Retaining Wall
ACC Area
160
170
180
190
Scale
metres 0 20 40 60
feet 0 50 100 200

Fig. 1.10
Plan of the Citadel

not to be republished © NCERT

3.3 The Citadel

It is on the Citadel that we find evidence of structures that were probably used for special public purposes. These include the warehouse – a massive structure of which the lower brick portions remain, while the upper portions, probably of wood, decayed long ago – and the Great Bath.

The Great Bath was a large rectangular tank in a courtyard surrounded by a corridor on all four sides. There were two flights of steps on the north and south leading into the tank, which was made watertight by setting bricks on edge and using a mortar of gypsum. There were rooms on three sides, in one of which was a large well. Water from the tank flowed into a huge drain. Across a lane to the north lay a smaller building with eight bathrooms, four on each side of a corridor, with drains from each bathroom connecting to a drain that ran along the corridor. The uniqueness of the structure, as well as the *context* in which it was found (the Citadel, with several distinctive buildings), has led scholars to suggest that it was meant for some kind of a special ritual bath.

➲ Discuss...
Which of the architectural features of Mohenjodaro indicate planning?

➲ Are there other structures on the Citadel apart from the warehouse and the Great Bath?

4. TRACKING SOCIAL DIFFERENCES

4.1 Burials

Archaeologists generally use certain strategies to find out whether there were social or economic differences amongst people living within a particular culture. These include studying burials. You are probably familiar with the massive pyramids of Egypt, some of which were contemporaneous with the Harappan civilisation. Many of these pyramids were royal burials, where enormous quantities of wealth was buried.

At burials in Harappan sites the dead were generally laid in pits. Sometimes, there were differences in the way the burial pit was made – in some instances, the hollowed-out spaces were lined with bricks. Could these variations be an indication of social differences? We are not sure.

Some graves contain pottery and ornaments, perhaps indicating a belief that these could be used in the afterlife. Jewellery has been found in burials of both men and women. In fact, in the excavations at the cemetery in Harappa in the mid-1980s, an ornament consisting of three shell rings, a jasper (a kind of semi-precious stone) bead and hundreds of micro beads was found near the skull of a male. In some instances the dead were buried with copper mirrors. But on the whole, it appears that the Harappans did not believe in burying precious things with the dead.

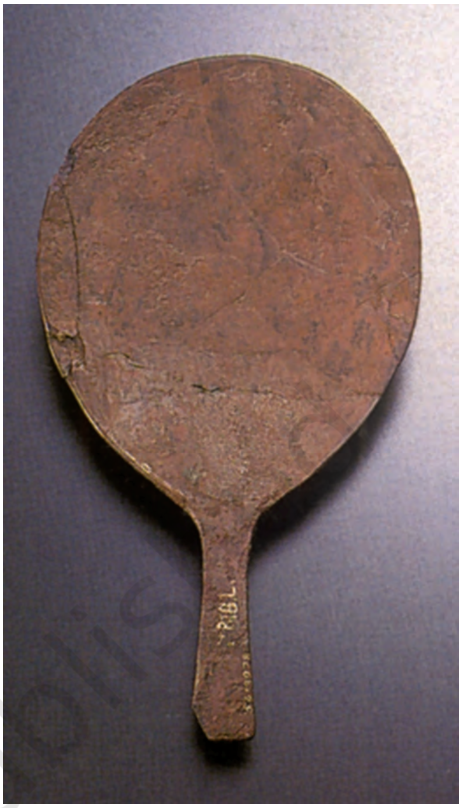
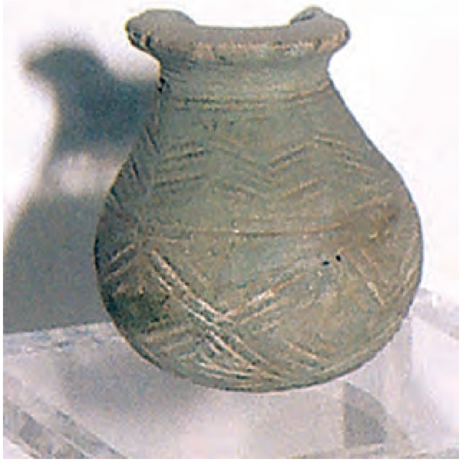


Fig. 1.11
A copper mirror

4.2 Looking for "luxuries"

Another strategy to identify social differences is to study artefacts, which archaeologists broadly classify as utilitarian and luxuries. The first category includes objects of daily use made fairly easily out of ordinary materials such as stone or clay. These include querns, pottery, needles, flesh-rubbers (body scrubbers), etc., and are usually found distributed throughout settlements. Archaeologists assume objects were luxuries if they are rare or made from costly, non-local materials or with complicated technologies. Thus, little pots of faience (a material made of ground sand or silica mixed with colour and a gum and then fired) were probably considered precious because they were difficult to make.

Fig. 1.12
A faience pot



The situation becomes more complicated when we find what seem to be articles of daily use, such as spindle whorls made of rare materials such as faience. Do we classify these as utilitarian or luxuries?

If we study the distribution of such artefacts, we find that rare objects made of valuable materials are generally concentrated in large settlements like Mohenjodaro and Harappa and are rarely found in the smaller settlements. For example, miniature pots of faience, perhaps used as perfume bottles, are found mostly in Mohenjodaro and Harappa, and there are none from small settlements like Kalibangan. Gold too was rare, and as at present, probably precious – all the gold jewellery found at Harappan sites was recovered from hoards.

Hoards are objects kept carefully by people, often inside containers such as pots. Such hoards can be of jewellery or metal objects saved for reuse by metalworkers. If for some reason the original owners do not retrieve them, they remain where they are left till some archaeologist finds them.

➲ Discuss...

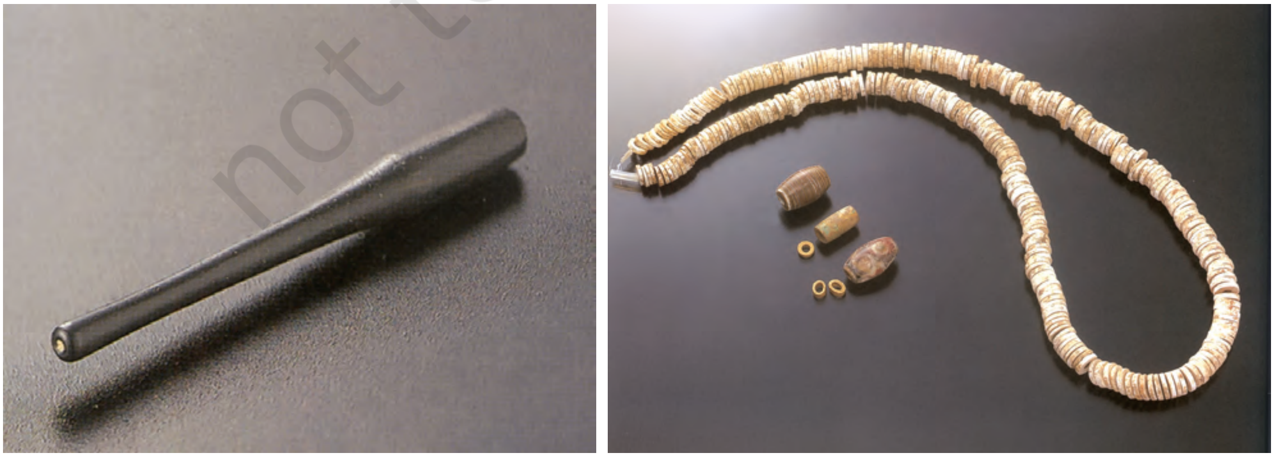
What are the modes of disposal of the dead prevalent at present? To what extent do these represent social differences?

5. FINDING OUT ABOUT CRAFT PRODUCTION

Locate Chanhudaro on Map 1. This is a tiny settlement (less than 7 hectares) as compared to Mohenjodaro (125 hectares), almost exclusively devoted to craft production, including bead-making, shell-cutting, metal-working, seal-making and weight-making.

The variety of materials used to make beads is remarkable: stones like carnelian (of a beautiful red colour), jasper, crystal, quartz and steatite; metals like copper, bronze and gold; and shell, faience and terracotta or burnt clay. Some beads were made of two or more stones, cemented together, some of stone with gold caps. The shapes were numerous – disc-shaped, cylindrical, spherical, barrel-shaped, segmented. Some were decorated by incising or painting, and some had designs etched onto them.

Fig. 1.13
A tool and beads



Techniques for making beads differed according to the material. Steatite, a very soft stone, was easily worked. Some beads were moulded out of a paste made with steatite powder. This permitted making a variety of shapes, unlike the geometrical forms made out of harder stones. How the steatite micro bead was made remains a puzzle for archaeologists studying ancient technology.

Archaeologists' experiments have revealed that the red colour of carnelian was obtained by firing the yellowish raw material and beads at various stages of production. Nodules were chipped into rough shapes, and then finely flaked into the final form. Grinding, polishing and drilling completed the process. Specialised drills have been found at Chanhudaro, Lothal and more recently at Dholavira.

If you locate Nageshwar and Balakot on Map 1, you will notice that both settlements are near the coast. These were specialised centres for making shell objects – including bangles, ladles and inlay – which were taken to other settlements. Similarly, it is likely that finished products (such as beads) from Chanhudaro and Lothal were taken to the large urban centres such as Mohenjodaro and Harappa.

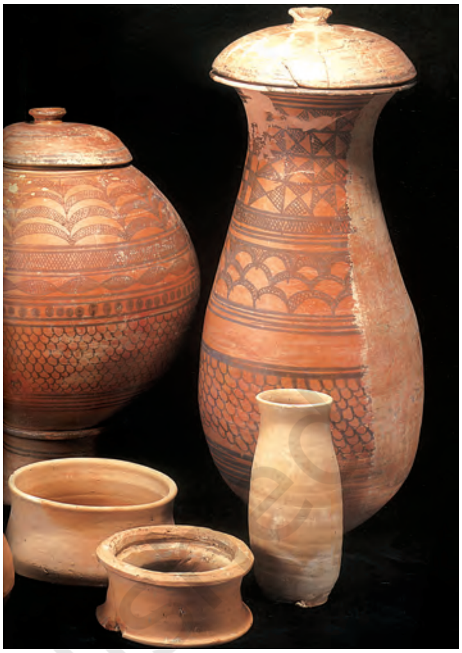
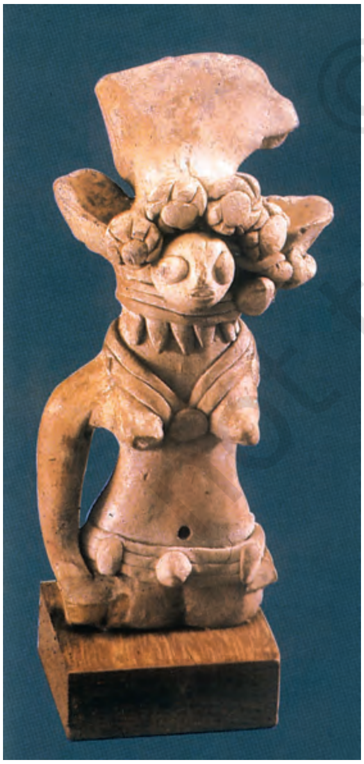


Fig. 1.14
Pottery
Some of these can be seen in the National Museum, Delhi or in the site museum at Lothal.



5.1 Identifying centres of production

In order to identify centres of craft production, archaeologists usually look for the following: raw material such as stone nodules, whole shells, copper ore; tools; unfinished objects; rejects and waste material. In fact, waste is one of the best indicators of craft work. For instance, if shell or stone is cut to make objects, then pieces of these materials will be discarded as waste at the place of production.

Fig. 1.15
A terracotta figurine

➲ Discuss...
Should the stone artefacts illustrated in the chapter be considered as utilitarian objects or as luxuries? Are there any that may fall into both categories?

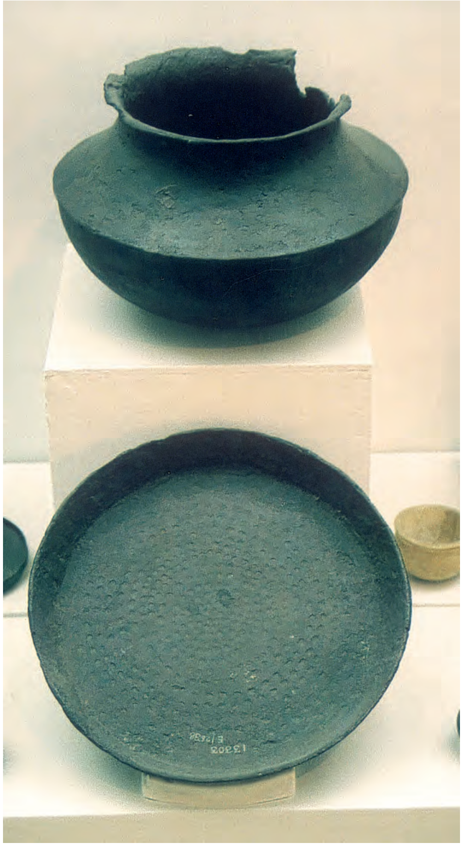


Fig.1.16
Copper and bronze vessels

Sometimes, larger waste pieces were used up to make smaller objects, but minuscule bits were usually left in the work area. These traces suggest that apart from small, specialised centres, craft production was also undertaken in large cities such as Mohenjodaro and Harappa.

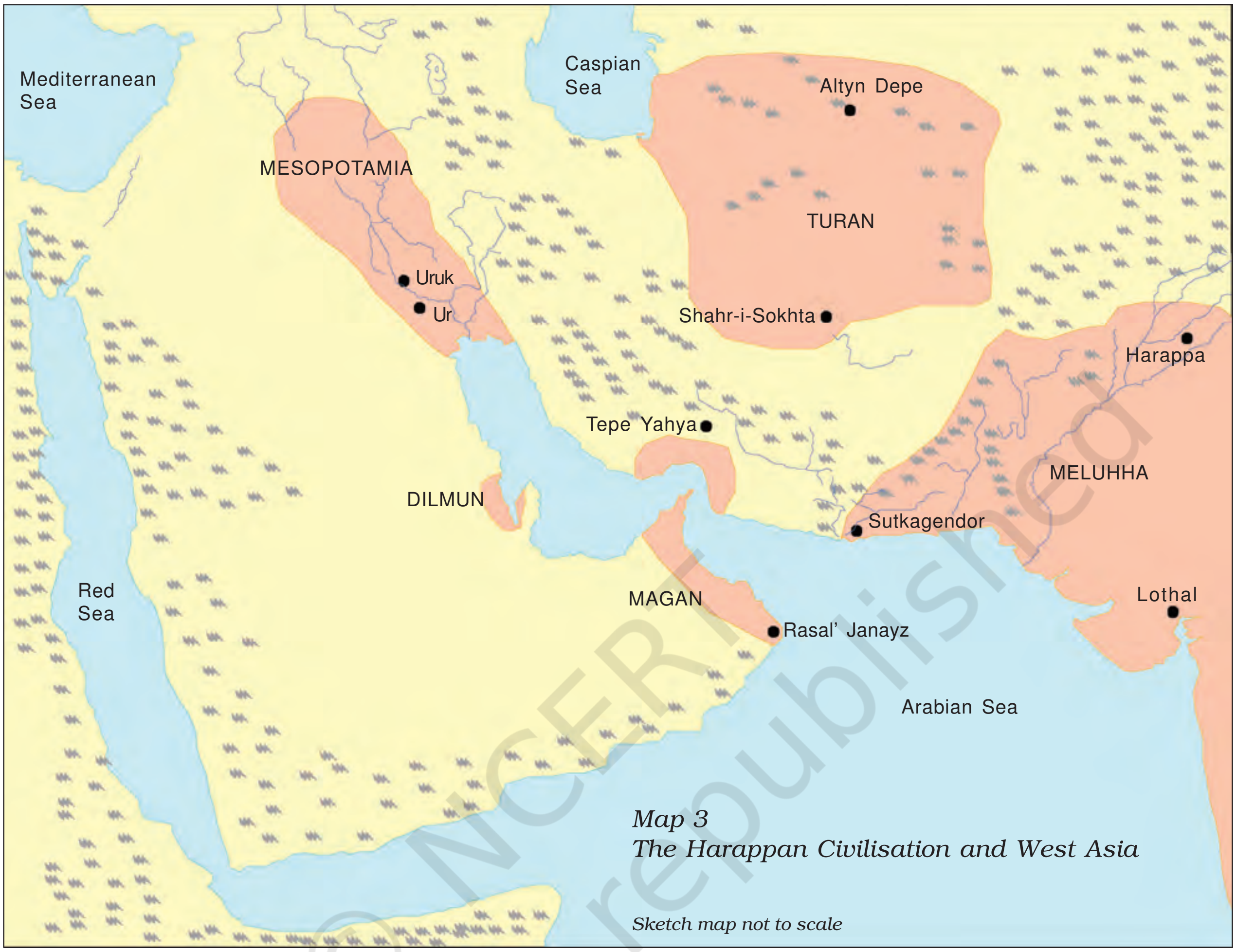
6. STRATEGIES FOR PROCURING MATERIALS

As is obvious, a variety of materials was used for craft production. While some such as clay were locally available, many such as stone, timber and metal had to be procured from outside the alluvial plain. Terracotta toy models of bullock carts suggest that this was one important means of transporting goods and people across land routes. Riverine routes along the Indus and its tributaries, as well as coastal routes were also probably used.

6.1 Materials from the subcontinent and beyond

The Harappans procured materials for craft production in various ways. For instance, they established settlements such as Nageshwar and Balakot in areas where shell was available. Other such sites were Shortughai, in far-off Afghanistan, near the best source of lapis lazuli, a blue stone that was apparently very highly valued, and Lothal which was near sources of carnelian (from Bharuch in Gujarat), steatite (from south Rajasthan and north Gujarat) and metal (from Rajasthan).

Another strategy for procuring raw materials may have been to send expeditions to areas such as the Khetri region of Rajasthan (for copper) and south India (for gold). These expeditions established communication with local communities. Occasional finds of Harappan artefacts such as steatite micro beads in these areas are indications of such contact. There is evidence in the Khetri area for what archaeologists call the Ganeshwar-Jodhpura culture, with its distinctive non-Harappan pottery and an unusual wealth of copper objects. It is possible that the inhabitants of this region supplied copper to the Harappans.


Mediterranean Sea
MESOPOTAMIA
Uruk
Ur
Caspian Sea
Altyn Depe
TURAN
Shahr-i-Sokhta
Harappa
Tepe Yahya
DILMUN
MELUHHA
Sutkagendor
Red Sea
MAGAN
Rasal' Janayz
Lothal
Arabian Sea

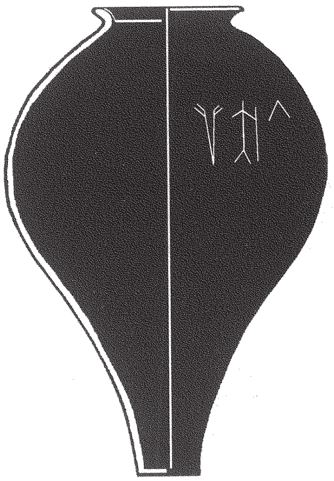
Map 3
The Harappan Civilisation and West Asia

Sketch map not to scale

6.2 Contact with distant lands

Recent archaeological finds suggest that copper was also probably brought from Oman, on the south-eastern tip of the Arabian peninsula. Chemical analyses have shown that both the Omani copper and Harappan artefacts have traces of nickel, suggesting a common origin. There are other traces of contact as well. A distinctive type of vessel, a large Harappan jar coated with a thick layer of black clay has been found at Omani sites. Such thick coatings prevent the percolation of liquids. We do not know what was carried in these vessels, but it is possible that the Harappans exchanged the contents of these vessels for Omani copper.

Fig. 1.17
A Harappan jar found in Oman



Mesopotamian texts datable to the third millennium BCE refer to copper coming from a region called Magan, perhaps a name for Oman, and interestingly enough copper found at

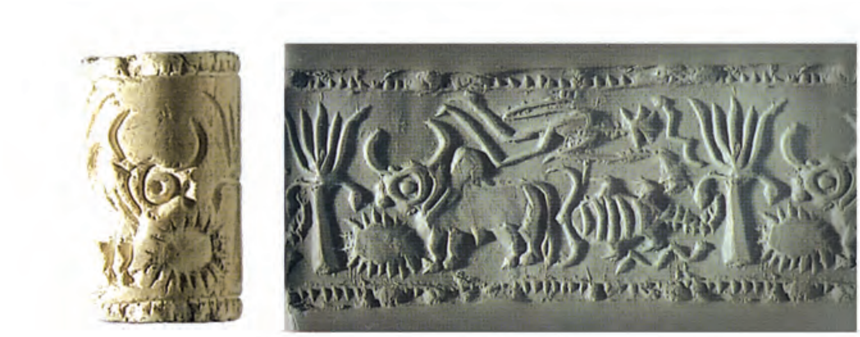


Fig. 1.18
This is a cylinder seal, typical of Mesopotamia, but the humped bull motif on it appears to be derived from the Indus region.

Mesopotamian sites also contains traces of nickel. Other archaeological finds suggestive of long-distance contacts include Harappan seals, weights, dice and beads. In this context, it is worth noting that Mesopotamian texts mention contact with regions named Dilmun (probably the island of Bahrain), Magan and Meluhha, possibly the Harappan region. They mention the products from Meluhha: carnelian, lapis lazuli, copper, gold, and varieties of wood. A Mesopotamian myth says of Meluhha: "May your bird be the *haja*-bird, may its call be heard in the royal palace." Some archaeologists think the *haja*-bird was the peacock. Did it get this name from its call? It is likely that communication with Oman, Bahrain or Mesopotamia was by sea. Mesopotamian texts refer to Meluhha as a land of seafarers. Besides, we find depictions of ships and boats on seals.

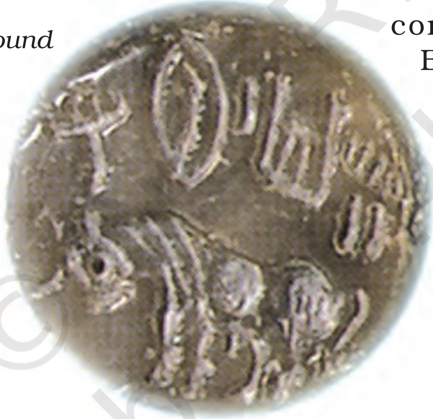
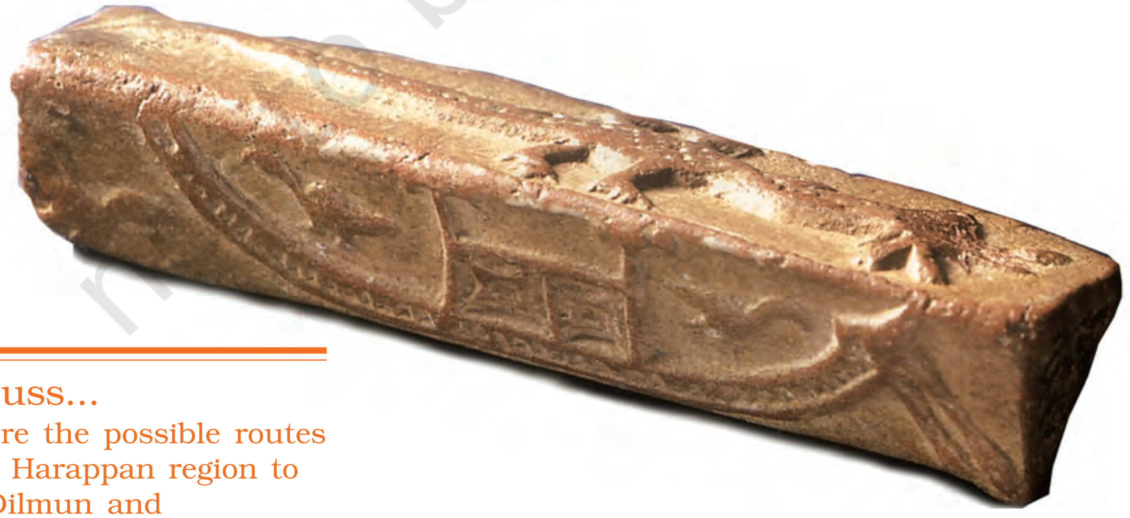


Fig. 1.19
The round "Persian Gulf" seal found in Bahrain sometimes carries Harappan motifs. Interestingly, local "Dilmun" weights followed the Harappan standard.

Fig. 1.20
Seal depicting a boat



➲ Discuss...

What were the possible routes from the Harappan region to Oman, Dilmun and Mesopotamia?

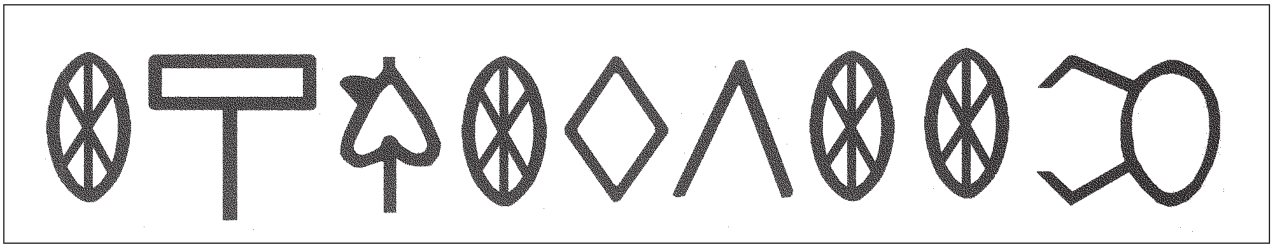


Fig. 1.21
Symbols, Letters on what is considered a signboard found at Dholavira.

7. SEALS, SCRIPT, WEIGHTS

7.1 Seals and sealings

Seals and sealings were used to facilitate long-distance communication. Imagine a bag of goods being sent from one place to another. Its mouth was tied with rope and on the knot was affixed some wet clay on which one or more seals were pressed, leaving an impression. If the bag reached with its sealing intact, it meant that it had not been tampered with. The sealing also conveyed the identity of the sender.

7.2 An enigmatic script

Harappan seals usually have a line of writing, probably containing the name and title of the owner. Scholars have also suggested that the motif (generally an animal) conveyed a meaning to those who could not read.

Most inscriptions are short, the longest containing about 26 signs. Although the script remains undeciphered to date, it was evidently not alphabetical (where each sign stands for a vowel or a consonant) as it has just too many signs – somewhere between 375 and 400. It is apparent that the script was written from right to left as some seals show a wider spacing on the right and cramping on the left, as if the engraver began working from the right and then ran out of space.

Consider the variety of objects on which writing has been found: seals, copper tools, rims of jars, copper and terracotta tablets, jewellery, bone rods, even an ancient signboard! Remember, there may have been writing on perishable materials too. Could this mean that literacy was widespread?

7.3 Weights

Exchanges were regulated by a precise system of weights, usually made of a stone called chert and generally cubical (Fig. 1.2), with no markings. The

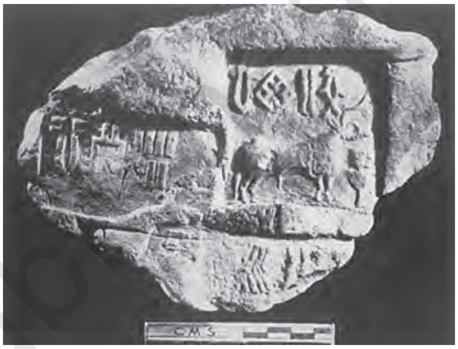


Fig. 1.22
A sealing from Ropar

➲ How many seals are impressed on this piece of clay?

➲ Discuss...

What are some of the present-day methods used for long-distance exchange of goods? What are their advantages and problems?

lower denominations of weights were binary (1, 2, 4, 8, 16, 32), while the higher denominations followed the decimal system (160, 200, 320, 640). The smaller weights were probably used for weighing jewellery and beads. Metal scale-pans have also been found.

8. ANCIENT AUTHORITY

There are indications of complex decisions being taken and implemented in Harappan society. Take for instance, the extraordinary uniformity of Harappan artefacts as evident in pottery (Fig. 1.14), seals, weights and bricks. Notably, bricks, though obviously not produced in any single centre, were of a uniform ratio throughout the region, from Jammu to Gujarat. We have also seen that settlements were strategically set up in specific locations for various reasons. Besides, labour was mobilised for making bricks and for the construction of massive walls and platforms.

Who organised these activities?

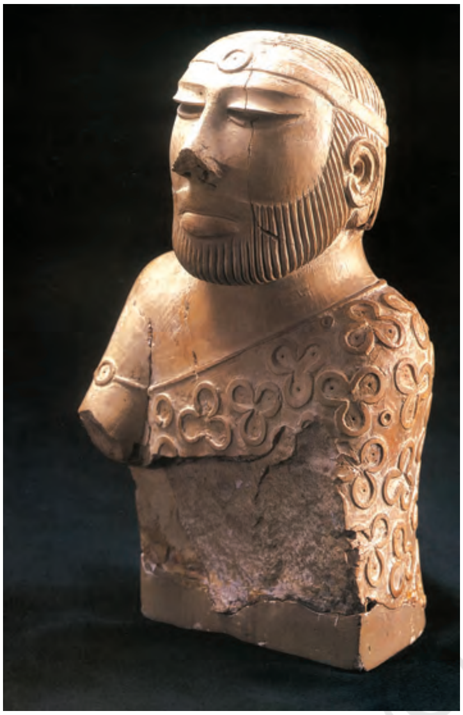


Fig. 1.23
A "priest-king"

8.1 Palaces and kings

If we look for a centre of power or for depictions of people in power, archaeological records provide no immediate answers. A large building found at Mohenjodaro was labelled as a palace by archaeologists but no spectacular finds were associated with it. A stone statue was labelled and continues to be known as the "priest-king". This is because archaeologists were familiar with Mesopotamian history and its "priest-kings" and have found parallels in the Indus region. But as we will see (p.23), the ritual practices of the Harappan civilisation are not well understood yet nor are there any means of knowing whether those who performed them also held political power.

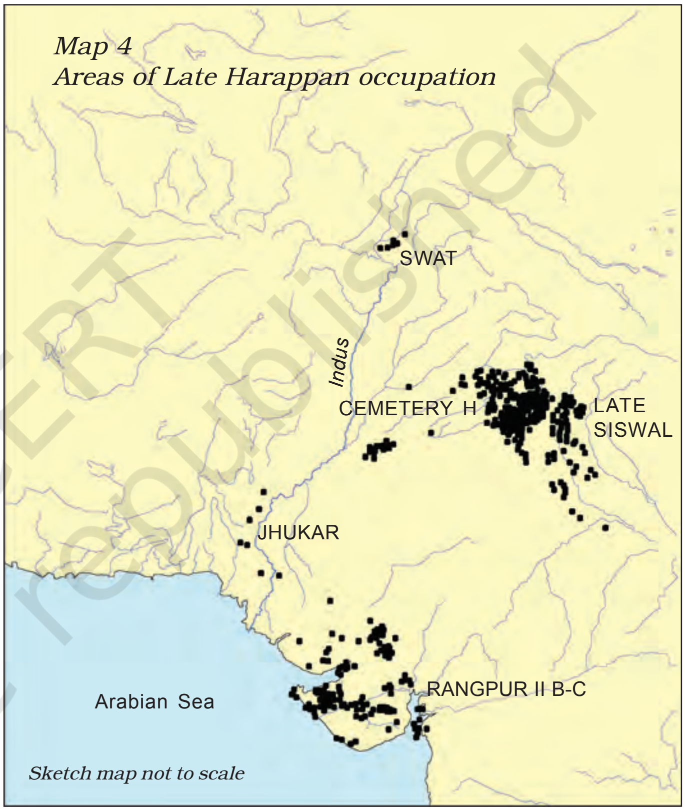
Some archaeologists are of the opinion that Harappan society had no rulers, and that everybody enjoyed equal status. Others feel there was no single ruler but several, that Mohenjodaro had a separate ruler, Harappa another, and so forth. Yet others argue that there was a single state, given the similarity in artefacts, the evidence for planned settlements, the standardised ratio of brick size, and the establishment of settlements near sources of raw

➲ Discuss...
Could everybody in Harappan society have been equal?

material. It is likely that the Harappans practiced some sort of democratic system. Some of the structures with their given features were created apparently for utilitarian purposes.

9. THE END OF THE CIVILISATION

There is evidence that by *c.* 1800 BCE most of the Mature Harappan sites in regions such as Cholistan had been abandoned. Simultaneously, there was an expansion of population into new settlements in Gujarat, Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh.


Map 4
Areas of Late Harappan occupation

Sketch map not to scale

In the few Harappan sites that continued to be occupied after 1900 BCE there appears to have been a transformation of material culture, marked by the disappearance of the distinctive artefacts of the civilisation – weights, seals, special beads. Writing, long-distance trade, and craft specialisation also disappeared. In general, far fewer materials were used to make far fewer things. House construction techniques deteriorated and large public structures were no longer produced. Overall, artefacts and settlements indicate a rural way of life in what are called "Late Harappan" or "successor cultures".

What brought about these changes? Several explanations have been put forward. These range from climatic change, deforestation, excessive floods, the shifting and/or drying up of rivers, to overuse of the landscape. Some of these "causes" may hold for certain settlements, but they do not explain the collapse of the entire civilisation.

It appears that a strong unifying element, perhaps the Harappan state, came to an end. This is evidenced by the disappearance of seals, the script, distinctive beads and pottery, the shift from a standardised weight system to the use of local weights; and the decline and abandonment of cities. The subcontinent would have to wait for over a millennium for new cities to develop in a completely different region.

➲ Discuss...

What are the similarities and differences between Maps 1, 2 and 4?

Source 3

Evidence of an "invasion"

Deadman Lane is a narrow alley, varying from 3 to 6 feet in width … At the point where the lane turns westward, part of a skull and the bones of the thorax and upper arm of an adult were discovered, all in very friable condition, at a depth of 4 ft 2 in. The body lay on its back diagonally across the lane. Fifteen inches to the west were a few fragments of a tiny skull. It is to these remains that the lane owes its name.

FROM JOHN MARSHALL, Mohenjodaro and the Indus Civilisation, 1931.

Sixteen skeletons of people with the ornaments that they were wearing when they died were found from the same part of Mohenjodaro in 1925.

Much later, in 1947, R.E.M. Wheeler, then Director-General of the ASI, tried to correlate this archaeological evidence with that of the *Rigveda,* the earliest known text in the subcontinent. He wrote:

The *Rigveda* mentions *pur*, meaning rampart, fort or stronghold. Indra, the Aryan war-god is called *puramdara*, the fort-destroyer.

Where are – or were – these citadels? It has in the past been supposed that they were mythical … The recent excavation of Harappa may be thought to have changed the picture. Here we have a highly evolved civilisation of essentially non-Aryan type, now known to have employed massive fortifications … What destroyed this firmly settled civilisation? Climatic, economic or political deterioration may have weakened it, but its ultimate extinction is more likely to have been completed by deliberate and large-scale destruction. It may be no mere chance that at a late period of Mohenjodaro men, women, and children, appear to have been massacred there. On circumstantial evidence, Indra stands accused.

FROM R.E.M. WHEELER, "Harappa 1946", Ancient India, 1947.

In the 1960s, the evidence of a massacre in Mohenjodaro was questioned by an archaeologist named George Dales. He demonstrated that the skeletons found at the site did not belong to the same period:

Whereas a couple of them definitely seem to indicate a slaughter, … the bulk of the bones were found in contexts suggesting burials of the sloppiest and most irreverent nature. There is no destruction level covering the latest period of the city, no sign of extensive burning, no bodies of warriors clad in armour and surrounded by the weapons of war. The citadel, the only fortified part of the city, yielded no evidence of a final defence.

FROM G.F. DALES, "The Mythical Massacre at Mohenjodaro", Expediton, 1964.

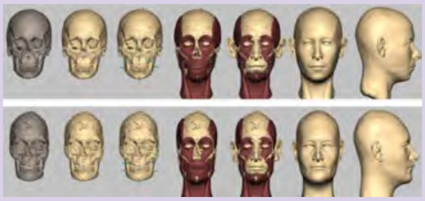
As you can see, a careful re-examination of the data can sometimes lead to a reversal of earlier interpretations. In this respect, it is necessary to mention the recent **archaeogenetic** research carried out at the site of Rakhigarhi. The site, located in Hisar district of Haryana, is the biggest Harappan city, spread over an area of 550 Hectare. In order to study the genetic history of the Harappans, DNA was extracted from the skeletal remains excavated at Rakhigarhi. This research was carried out by The Deccan College Deemed University, Pune in collaboration with Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology, Hyderabad and The Harvard Medical College. The analysis of the data indicates that the Harappans are the indigenous people of this region.

The genetic roots of the Harappans go back to 10,000 BCE. The DNA of the Harappans has continued till today and a majority of the South Asian population appears to be their descendents. Due to trade and cultural contacts of the Harappans with distant regions there is a mixture of genes in small quantity. The continuity without any break in genetic history as well as cultural history rules out large scale immigration of the so-called Aryans. This research also indicates that the people coming from bordering areas and distant regions were absorbed in the Indian society. At no stage, the genetic history of the Indians was either discontinued or broken. As the Harappans started moving towards Iran and Central Asia, their genes also gradually spread in these regions.

The same team of researchers reconstructed 3D features of the Harappan people. The reconstructed facial features of the Harappans, male and female, show remarkable similarity with the modern population of Haryana. Thus, this study has indicated unbroken continuity for 5000 years in this region.

From Vasant Shinde, et.al., An ancient Harrapan genome lacks ancestry from steppe pastoralists or Iranian farmers. Cell, 179 (3), 2019.

Harappan skeletal remains from Rakhigarhi - DNA was extracted from this skeleton.



Reconstructed 3D facial features of Harappan male and female respectively.

10. DISCOVERING THE HARAPPAN CIVILISATION

So far, we have examined facets of the Harappan civilisation in the context of how archaeologists have used evidence from material remains to piece together parts of a fascinating history. However, there is another story as well – about how archaeologists "discovered" the civilisation.

When Harappan cities fell into ruin, people gradually forgot all about them. When men and women began living in the area millennia later, they did not know what to make of the strange artefacts that occasionally surfaced, washed by floods or exposed by soil erosion, or turned up while ploughing a field, or digging for treasure.

Archaeogenetics is the study of DNA of ancient population. It involves various methods of molecular genetics to understand population history.

10.1 Cunningham's confusion

When Cunningham, the first Director-General of the ASI, began archaeological excavations in the mid-nineteenth century, archaeologists preferred to use the written word (texts and inscriptions) as a guide to investigations. In fact, Cunningham's main interest was in the archaeology of the Early Historic (*c.* sixth century BCE-fourth century CE) and later periods. He used the accounts left by Chinese Buddhist pilgrims who had visited the subcontinent between the fourth and seventh centuries CE to locate early settlements. Cunningham also collected, documented and translated inscriptions found during his surveys. When he excavated sites he tended to recover artefacts that he thought had cultural value.

A site like Harappa, which was not part of the itinerary of the Chinese pilgrims and was not known as an Early Historic city, did not fit very neatly within his framework of investigation. So, although Harappan artefacts were found fairly often during the nineteenth century and some of these reached Cunningham, he did not realise how old these were.

A Harappan seal was given to Cunningham by an Englishman. He noted the object, but unsuccessfully tried to place it within the time-frame with which he was familiar. This was because he, like many others, thought that Indian history began with the first cities in the Ganga valley (see Chapter 2). Given his specific focus, it is not surprising that he missed the significance of Harappa.

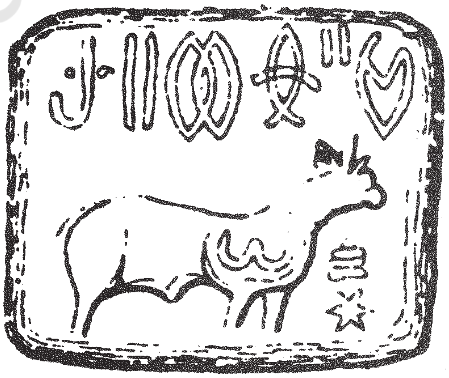


Fig. 1.24
Cunningham's sketch of the first-known seal from Harappa

Sites, mounds, layers

Archaeological *sites* are formed through the production, use and discarding of materials and structures. When people continue to live in the same place, their constant use and reuse of the landscape results in the build up of occupational debris, called a *mound*. Brief or permanent abandonment results in alteration of the landscape by wind or water activity and erosion. Occupations are detected by traces of ancient materials found in *layers*, which differ from one another in colour, texture and the artefacts that are found in them. Abandonment or desertions, what are called "sterile layers", can be identified by the absence of such traces.

Generally, the lowest layers are the oldest and the highest are the most recent. The study of these layers is called stratigraphy. Artefacts found in layers can be assigned to specific *cultural periods* and can thus provide the *cultural sequence* for a site.

10.2 A new old civilisation

Subsequently, seals were discovered at Harappa by archaeologists such as Daya Ram Sahni in the early decades of the twentieth century, in layers that were definitely much older than Early Historic levels. It was then that their significance began to be realised. Another archaeologist, Rakhal Das Banerji found similar seals at Mohenjodaro, leading to the conjecture that these sites were part of a single archaeological culture. Based on these finds, in 1924, John Marshall, Director-General of the ASI, announced the discovery of a new civilisation in the Indus valley to the world. As S.N. Roy noted in *The Story of Indian Archaeology,* "Marshall left India three thousand years older than he had found her." This was because similar, till-then-unidentified seals were found at excavations at Mesopotamian sites. It was then that the world knew not only of a new civilisation, but also of one contemporaneous with Mesopotamia.

In fact, John Marshall's stint as Director-General of the ASI marked a major change in Indian archaeology. He was the first professional archaeologist to work in India, and brought his experience of working in Greece and Crete to the field. More importantly, though like Cunningham he too was interested in spectacular finds, he was equally keen to look for patterns of everyday life.

Marshall tended to excavate along regular horizontal units, measured uniformly throughout the mound, ignoring the stratigraphy of the site. This meant that all the artefacts recovered from the same unit were grouped together, even if they were found at different stratigraphic layers. As a result, valuable

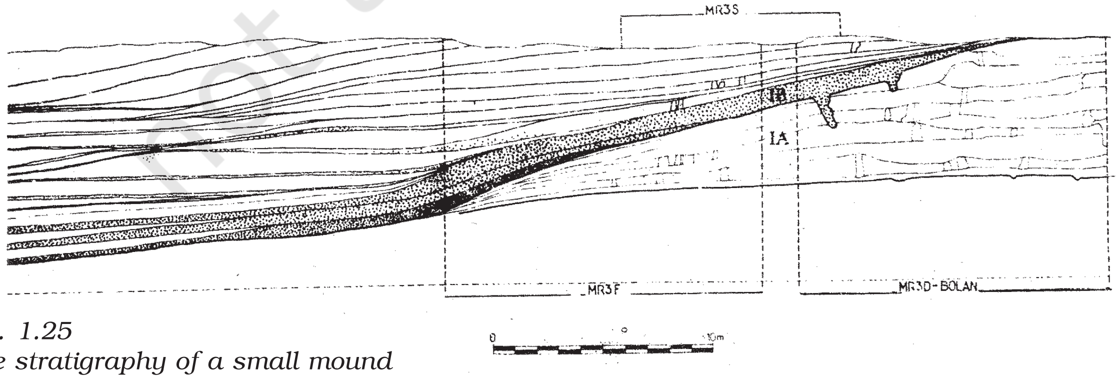


Fig. 1.25
The stratigraphy of a small mound
Notice that the layers are not exactly horizontal.

information about the context of these finds was irretrievably lost.

10.3 New techniques and questions

It was R.E.M. Wheeler, after he took over as Director-General of the ASI in 1944, who rectified this problem. Wheeler recognised that it was necessary to follow the stratigraphy of the mound rather than dig mechanically along uniform horizontal lines. Moreover, as an ex-army brigadier, he brought with him a military precision to the practice of archaeology.

The frontiers of the Harappan civilisation have little or no connection with present-day national boundaries. However, with the partition of the subcontinent and the creation of Pakistan, the major known sites became part of Pakistan. This has spurred Indian archaeologists to try and locate sites in India. An extensive survey in Kutch has revealed a number of Harappan settlements and explorations in Punjab and Haryana have added to the list of Harappan sites. While Kalibangan, Lothal, Rakhi Garhi and most recently Dholavira have been discovered, explored and excavated as part of these efforts, fresh explorations continue.

Over the decades, new issues have assumed importance. Where some archaeologists are often keen to obtain a cultural sequence, others try to understand the logic underlying the location of specific sites. They also grapple with the wealth of artefacts, trying to figure out the functions these may have served.

Since the 1980s, there has also been growing international interest in Harappan archaeology. Specialists from the subcontinent and abroad have been jointly working at both Harappa and Mohenjodaro. They are using modern scientific techniques including surface exploration to recover traces of clay, stone, metal and plant and animal remains as well as to minutely analyse every scrap of available evidence. These explorations promise to yield interesting results in the future.

➲ Discuss...

Which of the themes in this chapter would have interested Cunningham? Which are the issues that have been of interest since 1947?

Wheeler at Harappa

Early archaeologists were often driven by a sense of adventure. This is what Wheeler wrote about his experience at Harappa:

> It was, I recall, on a warm May night in 1944 that a four miles' *tonga*-ride brought me as the newly appointed Director General of the Archaeological Survey with my local Muslim officer from a little railway-station labelled "Harappa" along a deep sand track to a small rest-house beside the moonlit mounds of the ancient site. Warned by my anxious colleague that we must start our inspection at 5.30 next morning and finish by 7.30 "after which it would be too hot", we turned in with the dark figure of the *punka-walla* crouched patiently in the entrance and the night air rent by innumerable jackals in the neighbouring wilderness.
>
> Next morning, punctually at 5.30, our little procession started out towards the sandy heaps. Within ten minutes I stopped and rubbed my eyes as I gazed upon the tallest mound, scarcely trusting my vision. Six hours later my embarrassed staff and I were still toiling with picks and knives under the blazing sun, the mad sahib (I am afraid) setting a relentless pace.
>
> FROM R.E.M. WHEELER,
> *My Archaeological Mission to India and Pakistan,* 1976.

11. PROBLEMS OF PIECING TOGETHER THE PAST

As we have seen, it is not the Harappan script that helps in understanding the ancient civilisation. Rather, it is material evidence that allows archaeologists to better reconstruct Harappan life. This material could be pottery, tools, ornaments, household objects, etc. Organic materials such as cloth, leather, wood and reeds generally decompose, especially in tropical regions. What survive are stone, burnt clay (or terracotta), metal, etc.

It is also important to remember that only broken or useless objects would have been thrown away. Other things would probably have been recycled. Consequently, valuable artefacts that are found intact were either lost in the past or hoarded and never retrieved. In other words, such finds are accidental rather than typical.

11.1 Classifying finds

Recovering artefacts is just the beginning of the archaeological enterprise. Archaeologists then classify their finds. One simple principle of classification is in terms of material, such as stone, clay, metal, bone, ivory, etc. The second, and more complicated, is in terms of function: archaeologists have to decide whether, for instance, an artefact is a tool or an ornament, or both, or something meant for ritual use.

An understanding of the function of an artefact is often shaped by its resemblance with present-day things – beads, querns, stone blades and pots are obvious examples. Archaeologists also try to identify the function of an artefact by investigating the context in which it was found: was it found in a house, in a drain, in a grave, in a kiln?

Sometimes, archaeologists have to take recourse to indirect evidence. For instance, though there are traces of cotton at some Harappan sites, to find out about clothing we have to depend on indirect evidence including depictions in sculpture.

Archaeologists have to develop frames of reference. We have seen that the first Harappan seal that was found could not be understood till archaeologists had a context in which to place it – both in terms of the cultural sequence in which it was found, and in terms of a comparison with finds in Mesopotamia.

11.2 Problems of interpretation

The problems of archaeological interpretation are perhaps most evident in attempts to reconstruct religious practices. Early archaeologists thought that certain objects which seemed unusual or unfamiliar may have had a religious significance. These included terracotta figurines of women, heavily jewelled, some with elaborate head-dresses. These were regarded as mother goddesses. Rare stone statuary of men in an almost standardised posture, seated with one hand on the knee – such as the "priest-king" – was also similarly classified. In other instances, structures have been assigned ritual significance. These include the Great Bath and fire altars found at Kalibangan and Lothal.

Attempts have also been made to reconstruct religious beliefs and practices by examining seals, some of which seem to depict ritual scenes. Others, with plant motifs, are thought to indicate nature worship. Some animals – such as the one-horned animal, often called the "unicorn" – depicted on seals seem to be mythical, composite creatures. In some seals, a figure shown seated cross-legged in a "yogic" posture, sometimes surrounded by animals, has been regarded as a depiction of "proto-Shiva", that is, an early form of one of the major deities of Hinduism. Besides, conical stone objects have been classified as *lingas*.

Many reconstructions of Harappan religion are made on the assumption that later traditions provide parallels with earlier ones. This is because archaeologists often move from the known to the unknown, that is, from the present to the past. While this is plausible in the case of stone querns and pots, it becomes more speculative when we extend it to "religious" symbols.

Let us look, for instance, at the "proto-Shiva" seals. The earliest religious text, the *Rigveda* (compiled *c.* 1500-1000 BCE) mentions a god named Rudra, which is a name used for Shiva in later Puranic traditions (in the first millennium CE; see also Chapter 4). However, unlike Shiva, Rudra in the *Rigveda* is neither depicted as Pashupati (lord of animals in general and cattle in particular), nor as a yogi. In other words, this depiction does not match the description of Rudra in the *Rigveda*. Is this, then, possibly a shaman as some scholars have suggested?

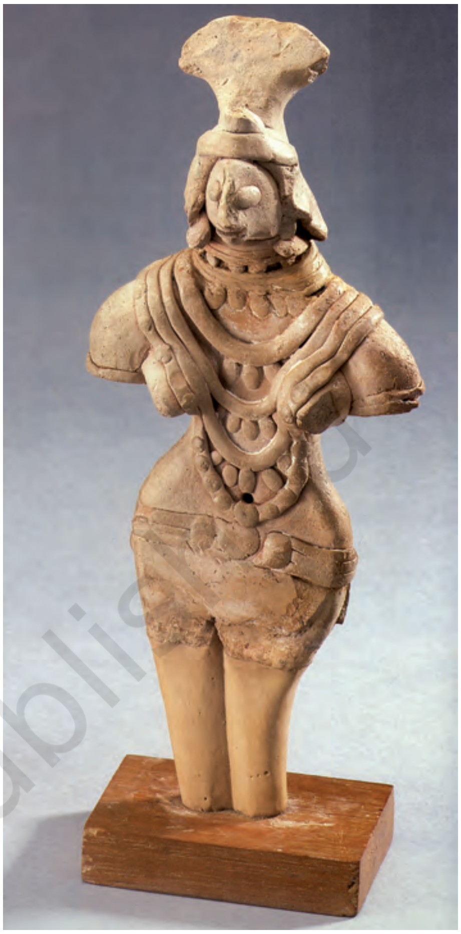


Fig. 1.26
Was this a mother goddess?

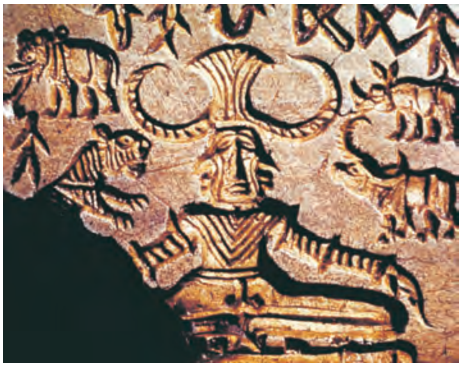


Fig. 1.27
A "proto-Shiva" seal

A *linga* is a polished stone that is worshipped as a symbol of Shiva.

Shamans are men and women who claim magical and healing powers, as well as an ability to communicate with the other world.

What has been achieved after so many decades of archaeological work? We have a fairly good idea of the Harappan economy. We have been able to tease out social differences and we have some idea of how the civilisation functioned. It is really not clear how much more we would know if the script were to be deciphered. If a bilingual inscription is found, questions about the languages spoken by the Harappans could perhaps be put to rest.

Several reconstructions remain speculative at present. Was the Great Bath a ritual structure? How widespread was literacy? Why do Harappan cemeteries show little social differentiation? Also unanswered are questions on gender – did women make pottery or did they only paint pots (as at present)? What about other craftspersons? What were the terracotta female figurines used for? Very few scholars have investigated issues of gender in the context of the Harappan civilisation and this is a whole new area for future work.

More research is also required on the relationship between the Harappans and the Vedic people as some scholars have argued that the authors of the Harappans civilisation and the Vedic people were the same.

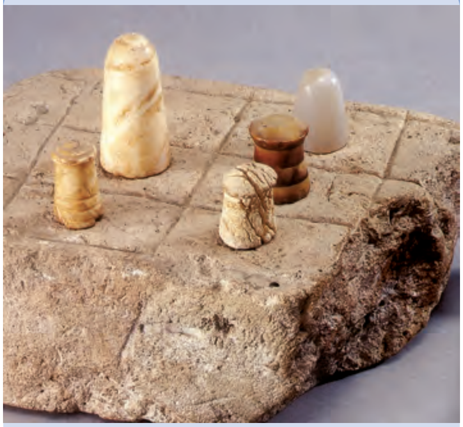


Fig. 1.28
Gamesmen or lingas*?*

This is what Mackay, one of the earliest excavators, had to say about these stones:

> Various small cones made of lapis lazuli, jasper, chalcedony, and other stones, most beautifully cut and finished, and less than two inches in height, are also thought to be *lingas* … on the other hand, it is just as possible that they were used in the board-games …
>
> FROM ERNEST MACKAY, *Early Indus Civilisation*, 1948.

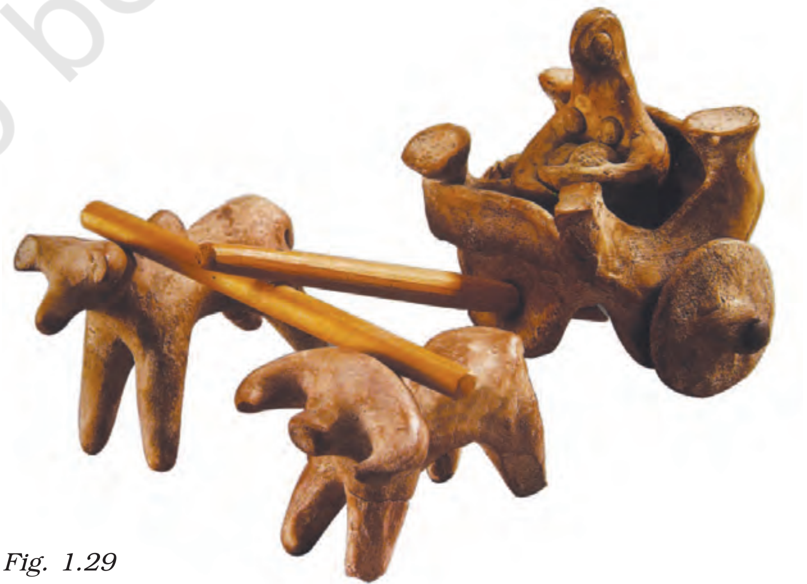


Fig. 1.29
A terracotta cart

➲ Discuss...

What are the aspects of Harappan economy that have been reconstructed from archaeological evidence?

TIMELINE 1
MAJOR PERIODS IN EARLY INDIAN ARCHAEOLOGY

2 million BP (BEFORE PRESENT)	Lower Palaeolithic
80,000	Middle Palaeolithic
35,000	Upper Palaeolithic
12,000	Mesolithic
10,000	Neolithic (early agriculturists and pastoralists)
6,000	Chalcolithic (first use of copper)
2600 BCE	Harappan civilisation
1000 BCE	Early iron, megalithic burials
600 BCE-400 CE	Early Historic

(Note: All dates are approximate. Besides, there are wide variations in developments in different parts of the subcontinent. Dates indicated are for the earliest evidence of each phase.)

TIMELINE 2
MAJOR DEVELOPMENTS IN HARAPPAN ARCHAEOLOGY

Nineteenth century	
1875	Report of Alexander Cunningham on Harappan seal
Twentieth century	
1921	Daya Ram Sahni begins excavations at Harappa
1922	Excavations begin at Mohenjodaro
1946	R.E.M. Wheeler excavates at Harappa
1955	S.R. Rao begins excavations at Lothal
1960	B.B. Lal and B.K. Thapar begin excavations at Kalibangan
1974	M.R. Mughal begins explorations in Bahawalpur
1980	A team of German and Italian archaeologists begins surface explorations at Mohenjodaro
1986	American team begins excavations at Harappa
1990	R.S. Bisht begins excavations at Dholavira
1997	Amrendra Nath starts excavations at Rakhigarhi
2013	Vasant Shinde begins archaeogenetic research at Rakhigarhi

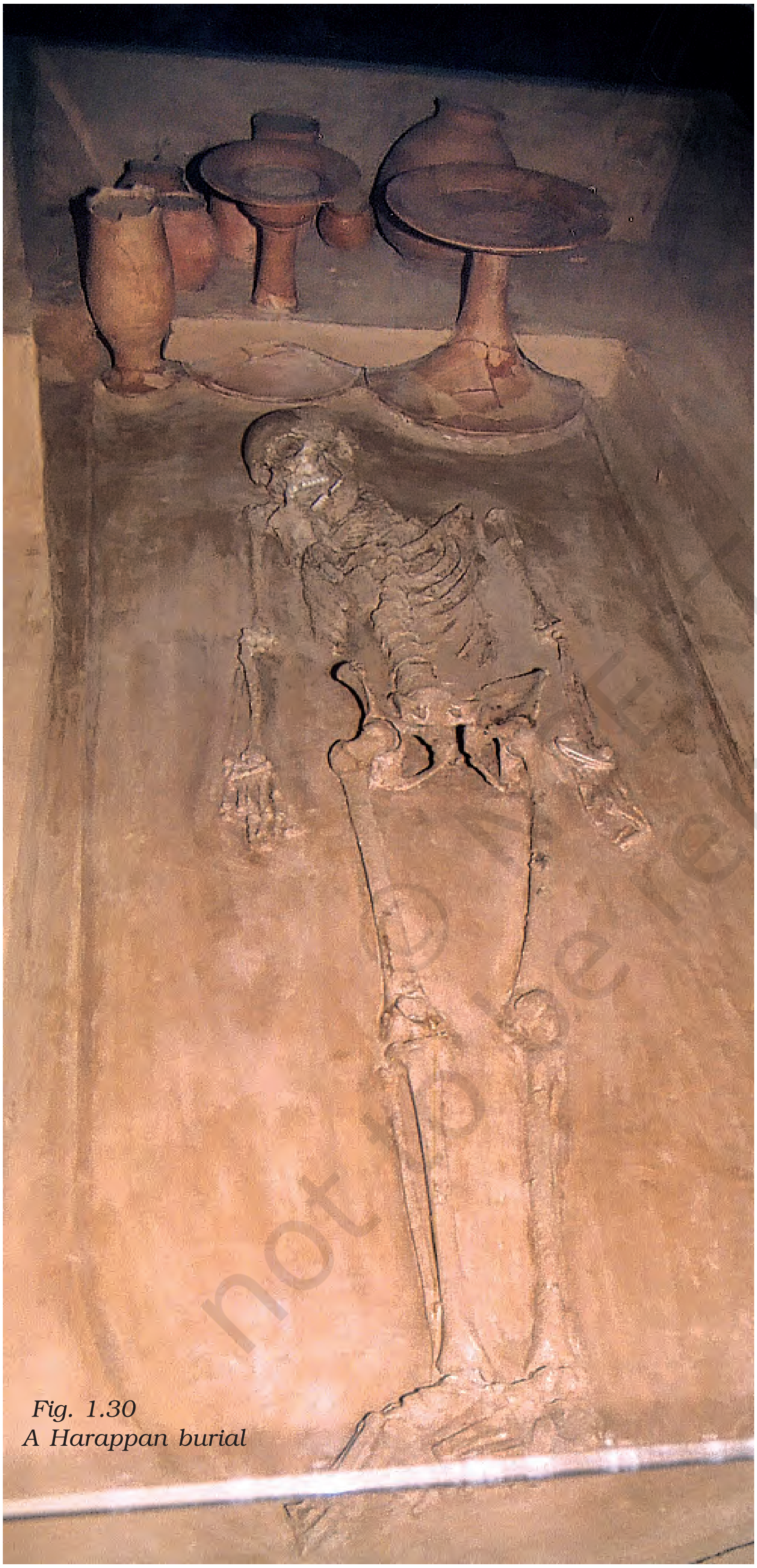


Fig. 1.30
A Harappan burial

ANSWER IN 100-150 WORDS

1. List the items of food available to people in Harappan cities. Identify the groups who would have provided these.

2. How do archaeologists trace socio-economic differences in Harappan society? What are the differences that they notice?

3. Would you agree that the drainage system in Harappan cities indicates town planning? Give reasons for your answer.

4. List the materials used to make beads in the Harappan civilisation. Describe the process by which any one kind of bead was made.

5. Look at Fig. 1.30 and describe what you see. How is the body placed? What are the objects placed near it? Are there any artefacts on the body? Do these indicate the sex of the skeleton?

Write a short essay (about 500 words) on the following:

6. Describe some of the distinctive features of Mohenjodaro.

7. List the raw materials required for craft production in the Harappan civilisation and discuss how these might have been obtained.

8. Discuss how archaeologists reconstruct the past.

9. Discuss the functions that may have been performed by rulers in Harappan society.

Map work

10. On Map 1, use a pencil to circle sites where evidence of agriculture has been recovered. Mark an X against sites where there is evidence of craft production and R against sites where raw materials were found.

Project (any one)

11. Find out if there are any museums in your town. Visit one of them and write a report on any ten items, describing how old they are, where they were found, and why you think they are on display.

12. Collect illustrations of ten things made of stone, metal and clay produced and used at present. Compare these with the pictures of the Harappan civilisation in this chapter, and discuss the similarities and differences that you find.

If you would like to know more, read:

Raymond and Bridget Allchin. 1997. *Origins of a Civilization.* Viking, New Delhi.

G.L. Possehl. 2003. *The Indus Civilization.* Vistaar, New Delhi.

Shereen Ratnagar. 2001. *Understanding Harappa.* Tulika, New Delhi.

For more information, you could visit:
http://www.harappa.com/har/harres0.html

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THEME
TWO

KINGS, FARMERS AND TOWNS

EARLY STATES AND ECONOMIES (*C.* 600 BCE-600 CE)

There were several developments in different parts of the subcontinent during the long span of 1,500 years following the end of the Harappan civilisation. This was also the period during which the *Rigveda* was composed by people living along the Indus and its tributaries. Agricultural settlements emerged in many parts of the subcontinent, including north India, the Deccan Plateau, and parts of Karnataka. Besides, there is evidence of pastoral populations in the Deccan and further south. New modes of disposal of the dead, including the making of elaborate stone structures known as megaliths, emerged in central and south India from the first millennium BCE. In many cases, the dead were buried with a rich range of iron tools and weapons.

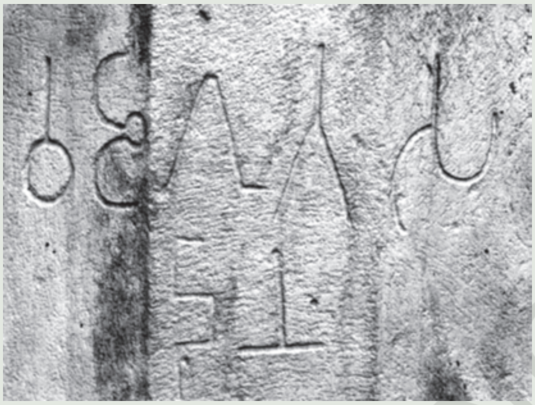


Fig. 2.1
An inscription, Sanchi (Madhya Pradesh), c. second century BCE

From *c.* sixth century BCE, there is evidence that there were other trends as well. Perhaps the most visible was the emergence of early states, empires and kingdoms. Underlying these political processes were other changes, evident in the ways in which agricultural production was organised. Simultaneously, new towns appeared almost throughout the subcontinent.

Historians attempt to understand these developments by drawing on a range of sources – inscriptions, texts, coins and visual material. As we will see, this is a complex process. You will also notice that these sources do not tell the entire story.

1. PRINSEP AND PIYADASSI

Epigraphy is the study of inscriptions.

Some of the most momentous developments in Indian epigraphy took place in the 1830s. This was when James Prinsep, an officer in the mint of the East India Company, deciphered Brahmi and Kharosthi, two scripts used in the earliest inscriptions and coins. He found that most of these mentioned a king referred to as Piyadassi – meaning "pleasant to behold"; there were a few inscriptions which also referred to the king as Asoka, one of the most famous rulers known from Buddhist texts.

This gave a new direction to investigations into early Indian political history as European and Indian scholars used inscriptions and texts composed in a variety of languages to reconstruct the lineages of major dynasties that had ruled the subcontinent. As a result, the broad contours of political history were in place by the early decades of the twentieth century.

Subsequently, scholars began to shift their focus to the *context* of political history, investigating whether there were connections between political changes and economic and social developments. It was soon realised that while there were links, these were not always simple or direct.

2. THE EARLIEST STATES

2.1 The sixteen *mahajanapadas*

The sixth century BCE is often regarded as a major turning point in early Indian history. It is an era associated with early states, cities, the growing use of iron, the development of coinage, etc. It also witnessed the growth of diverse systems of thought, including Buddhism and Jainism. Early Buddhist and Jaina texts (see also Chapter 4) mention, amongst other things, sixteen states known as *mahajanapadas*. Although the lists vary, some names such as Vajji, Magadha, Koshala, Kuru, Panchala, Gandhara and Avanti occur frequently. Clearly, these were amongst the most important *mahajanapadas*.

While most *mahajanapadas* were ruled by kings, some, known as *ganas* or *sanghas*, were oligarchies (p. 30), where power was shared by a number of men, often collectively called *rajas*. Both Mahavira and the Buddha (Chapter 4) belonged to such *ganas*. In some instances, as in the case of the Vajji *sangha*, the *rajas* probably controlled resources such as land collectively. Although their histories are often difficult to reconstruct due to the lack of sources, some of these states lasted for nearly a thousand years.

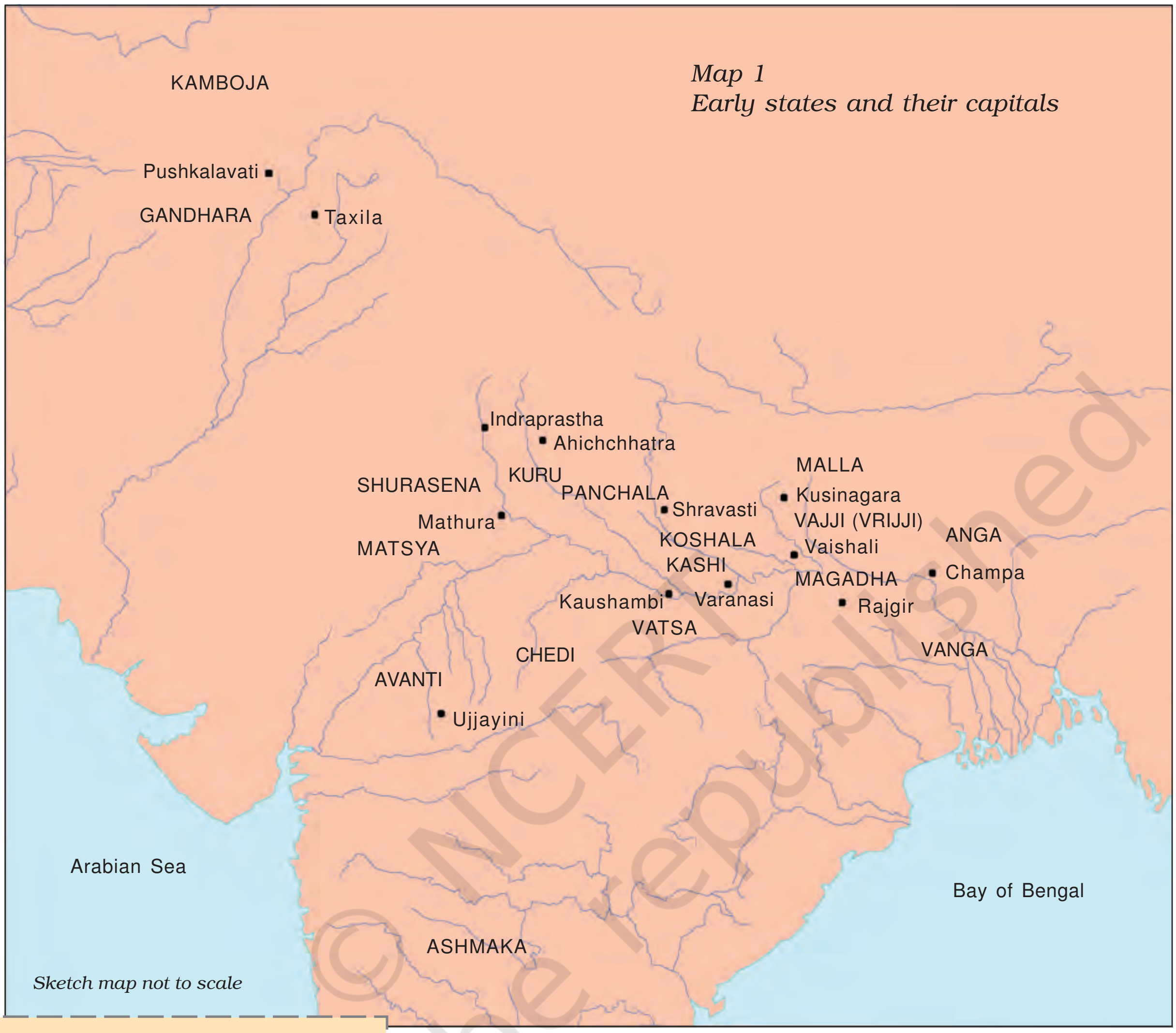
Each *mahajanapada* had a capital city, which was often fortified. Maintaining these fortified cities as well as providing for incipient armies and bureaucracies required resources. From *c.* sixth

Inscriptions

Inscriptions are writings engraved on hard surfaces such as stone, metal or pottery. They usually record the achievements, activities or ideas of those who commissioned them and include the exploits of kings, or donations made by women and men to religious institutions. Inscriptions are virtually permanent records, some of which carry dates. Others are dated on the basis of *palaeography* or styles of writing, with a fair amount of precision. For instance, in *c.* 250 BCE the letter "a" was written like this: . By *c.* 500 CE, it was written like this: .

The earliest inscriptions were in Prakrit, a name for languages used by ordinary people. Names of rulers such as Ajatasattu and Asoka, known from Prakrit texts and inscriptions, have been spelt in their Prakrit forms in this chapter. You will also find terms in languages such as Pali, Tamil and Sanskrit, which too were used to write inscriptions and texts. It is possible that people spoke in other languages as well, even though these were not used for writing.

Janapada means the land where a *jana* (a people, clan or tribe) sets its foot or settles. It is a word used in both Prakrit and Sanskrit.


KAMBOJA
Pushkalavati
GANDHARA
Taxila
Indraprastha
Ahichchhatra
SHURASENA
KURU
PANCHALA
Mathura
MATSYA
MALLA
Kusinagara
Shravasti
VAJJI (VRIJJI)
KOSHALA
Vaishali
ANGA
KASHI
MAGADHA
Champa
Kaushambi
Varanasi
Rajgir
VATSA
CHEDI
VANGA
AVANTI
Ujjayini
Arabian Sea
Bay of Bengal
ASHMAKA

Map 1
Early states and their capitals

Sketch map not to scale

➲ Which were the areas where states and cities were most densely clustered?

century BCE onwards, Brahmanas began composing Sanskrit texts known as the Dharmasutras. These laid down norms for rulers (as well as for other social categories), who were ideally expected to be Kshatriyas (see also Chapter 3). Rulers were advised to collect taxes and tribute from cultivators, traders and artisans. Were resources also procured from pastoralists and forest peoples? We do not really know. What we do know is that raids on neighbouring states were recognised as a legitimate means of acquiring wealth. Gradually, some states acquired standing armies and maintained regular bureaucracies. Others continued to depend on militia, recruited, more often than not, from the peasantry.

Oligarchy refers to a form of government where power is exercised by a group of men. The Roman Republic, about which you read last year, was an oligarchy in spite of its name.

2.2 First amongst the sixteen: Magadha

Between the sixth and the fourth centuries BCE, Magadha (in present-day Bihar) became the most powerful *mahajanapada*. Modern historians explain this development in a variety of ways: Magadha was a region where agriculture was especially productive. Besides, iron mines (in present-day Jharkhand) were accessible and provided resources for tools and weapons. Elephants, an important component of the army, were found in forests in the region. Also, the Ganga and its tributaries provided a means of cheap and convenient communication. However, early Buddhist and Jaina writers who wrote about Magadha attributed its power to the policies of individuals: ruthlessly ambitious kings of whom Bimbisara, Ajatasattu and Mahapadma Nanda are the best known, and their ministers, who helped implement their policies.

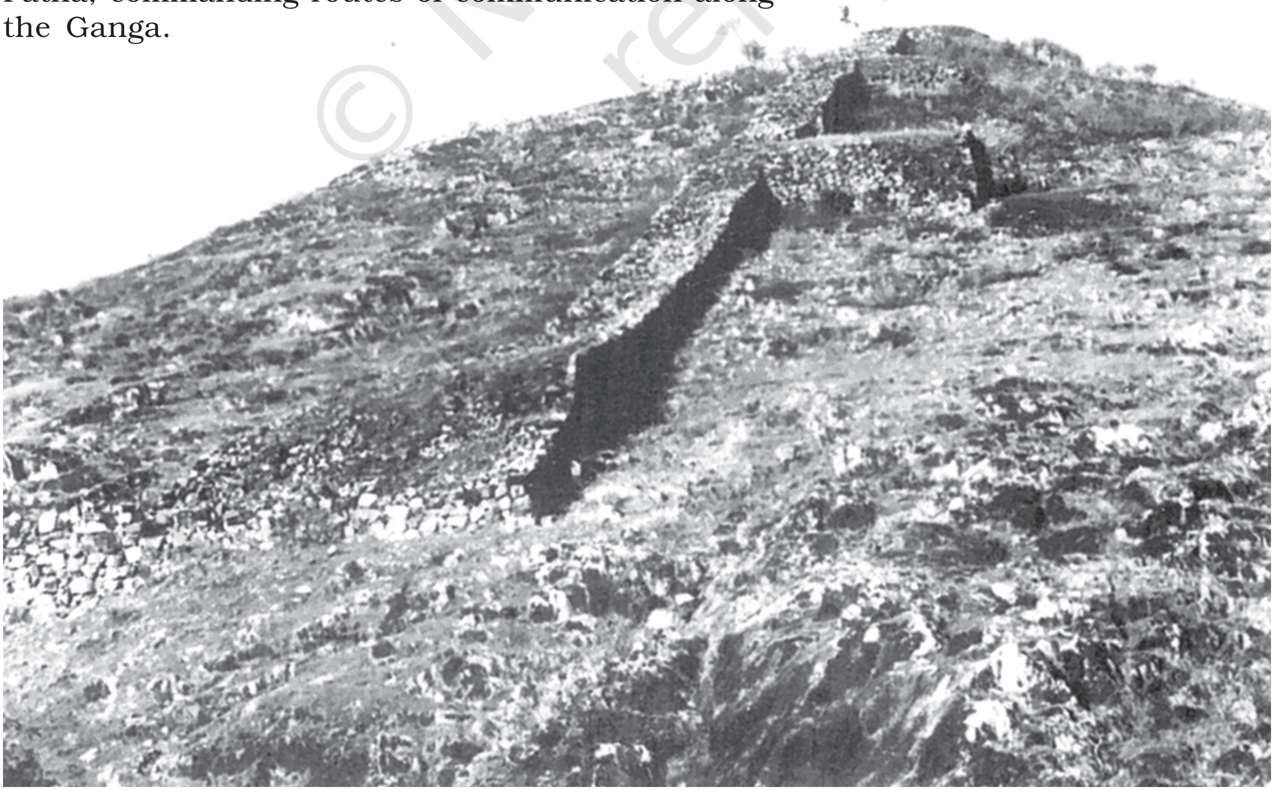
Initially, Rajagaha (the Prakrit name for present-day Rajgir in Bihar) was the capital of Magadha. Interestingly, the old name means "house of the king". Rajagaha was a fortified settlement, located amongst hills. Later, in the fourth century BCE, the capital was shifted to Pataliputra, present-day Patna, commanding routes of communication along the Ganga.

➲ Discuss...

What are the different explanations offered by early writers and present-day historians for the growth of Magadhan power?

Fig. 2.2
Fortification walls at Rajgir

➲ Why were these walls built?



3. AN EARLY EMPIRE

The growth of Magadha culminated in the emergence of the Mauryan Empire. Chandragupta Maurya, who founded the empire (*c.* 321 BCE), extended control as far northwest as Afghanistan and Baluchistan, and his grandson Asoka, arguably the most famous ruler of early India, conquered Kalinga (present-day coastal Orissa).

3.1 Finding out about the Mauryas

Historians have used a variety of sources to reconstruct the history of the Mauryan Empire. These include archaeological finds, especially sculpture. Also valuable are contemporary works, such as the account of Megasthenes (a Greek ambassador to the court of Chandragupta Maurya), which survives in fragments. Another source that is often used is the *Arthashastra,* parts of which were probably composed by Kautilya or Chanakya, traditionally believed to be the minister of Chandragupta. Besides, the Mauryas are mentioned in later Buddhist, Jaina and Puranic literature, as well as in Sanskrit literary works. While these are useful, the inscriptions of Asoka (*c.* 272/268-231 BCE) on rocks and pillars are often regarded as amongst the most valuable sources.

Asoka was the first ruler who inscribed his messages to his subjects and officials on stone surfaces – natural rocks as well as polished pillars. He used the inscriptions to proclaim what he understood to be *dhamma*. This included respect towards elders, generosity towards Brahmanas and those who renounced worldly life, treating slaves and servants kindly, and respect for religions and traditions other than one's own.

3.2 Administering the empire

There were five major political centres in the empire – the capital Pataliputra and the provincial centres of Taxila, Ujjayini, Tosali and Suvarnagiri, all mentioned in Asokan inscriptions. If we examine the content of these inscriptions, we find virtually the same message engraved everywhere – from the present-day North West Frontier Provinces of Pakistan, to Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and Uttarakhand in India. Could this vast empire have had a uniform administrative system? Historians have increasingly come to realise that

Languages and scripts

Most Asokan inscriptions were in the Prakrit language while those in the northwest of the subcontinet were in Aramaic and Greek. Most Prakrit inscriptions were written in the Brahmi script; however, some, in the northwest, were written in Kharosthi. The Aramaic and Greek scripts were used for inscriptions in Afghanistan.

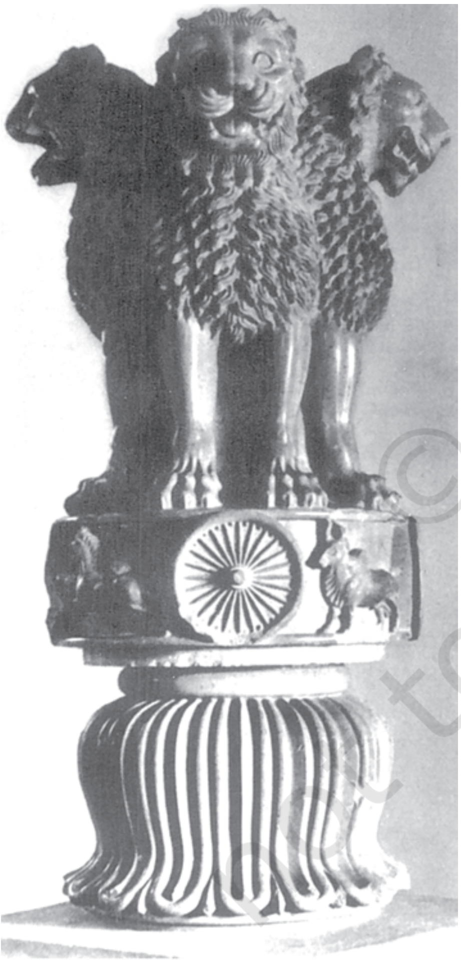
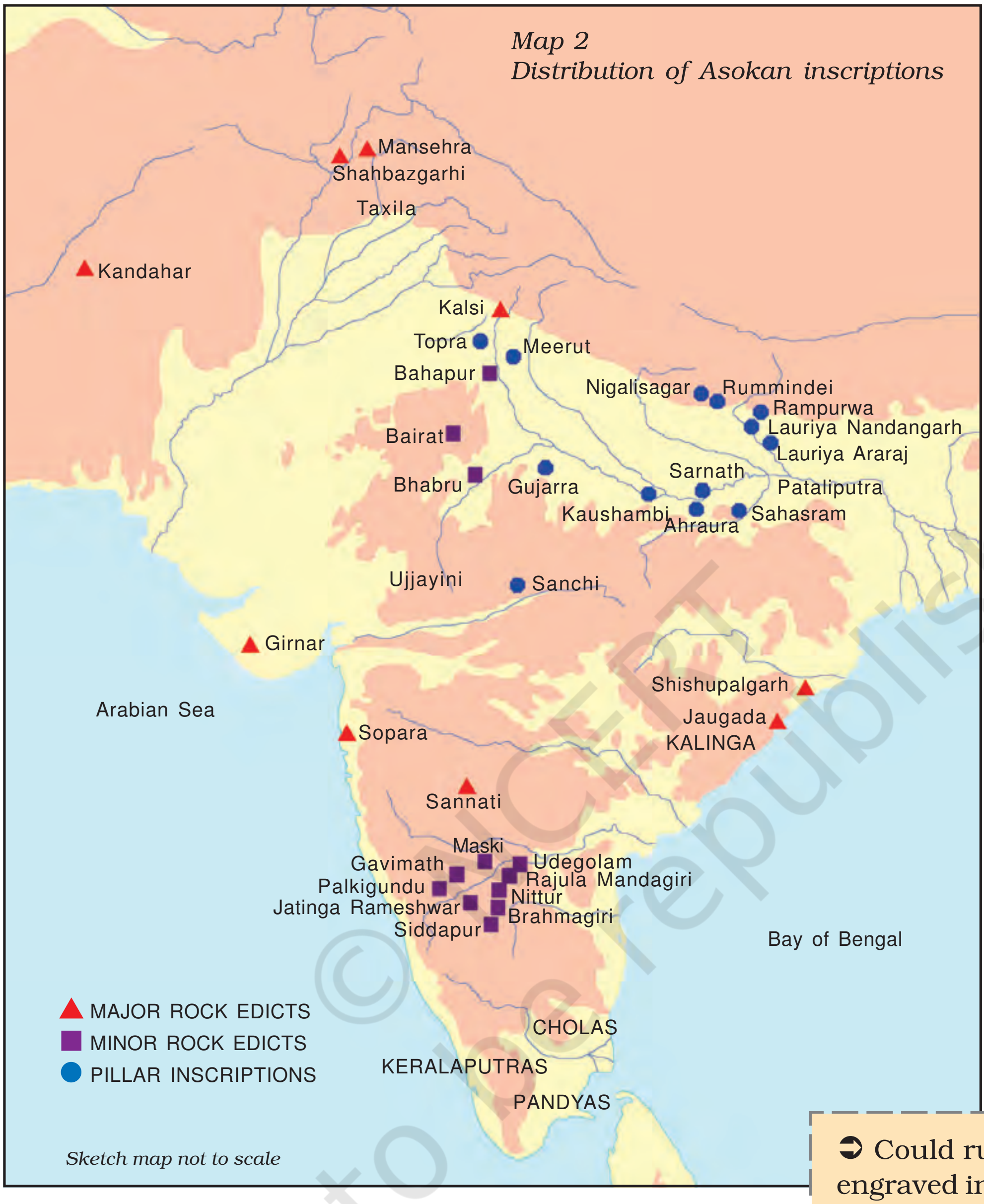


Fig. 2.3
The lion capital

➲ Why is the lion capital considered important today?



Map 2
Distribution of Asokan inscriptions

Mansehra
Shahbazgarhi
Taxila
Kandahar
Kalsi
Topra
Meerut
Bahapur
Nigalisagar
Rummindei
Rampurwa
Lauriya Nandangarh
Lauriya Araraj
Bairat
Bhabru
Gujarra
Sarnath
Pataliputra
Kaushambi
Ahraura
Sahasram
Ujjayini
Sanchi
Girnar
Shishupalgarh
Jaugada
KALINGA
Arabian Sea
Sopara
Sannati
Maski
Gavimath
Udegolam
Rajula Mandagiri
Palkigundu
Nittur
Jatinga Rameshwar
Brahmagiri
Siddapur
Bay of Bengal
CHOLAS
KERALAPUTRAS
PANDYAS
▲ MAJOR ROCK EDICTS
■ MINOR ROCK EDICTS
● PILLAR INSCRIPTIONS

Sketch map not to scale

this is unlikely. The regions included within the empire were just too diverse. Imagine the contrast between the hilly terrain of Afghanistan and the coast of Orissa.

It is likely that administrative control was strongest in areas around the capital and the provincial centres. These centres were carefully chosen, both Taxila and Ujjayini being situated on important long-distance trade routes, while Suvarnagiri (literally, the golden mountain) was possibly important for tapping the gold mines of Karnataka.

➲ Could rulers have engraved inscriptions in areas that were not included within their empire?

Source 1

What the king's officials did

Here is an excerpt from the account of Megasthenes:

> Of the great officers of state, some … superintend the rivers, measure the land, as is done in Egypt, and inspect the sluices by which water is let out from the main canals into their branches, so that every one may have an equal supply of it. The same persons have charge also of the huntsmen, and are entrusted with the power of rewarding or punishing them according to their deserts. They collect the taxes, and superintend the occupations connected with land; as those of the woodcutters, the carpenters, the blacksmiths, and the miners.

➲ Why were officials appointed to supervise these occupational groups?

➲ Discuss...

Read the excerpts from Megasthenes and the *Arthashastra* (Sources 1 and 2). To what extent do you think these texts are useful in reconstructing a history of Mauryan administration?

Communication along both land and riverine routes was vital for the existence of the empire. Journeys from the centre to the provinces could have taken weeks if not months. This meant arranging for provisions as well as protection for those who were on the move. It is obvious that the army was an important means for ensuring the latter. Megasthenes mentions a committee with six subcommittees for coordinating military activity. Of these, one looked after the navy, the second managed transport and provisions, the third was responsible for foot-soldiers, the fourth for horses, the fifth for chariots and the sixth for elephants. The activities of the second subcommittee were rather varied: arranging for bullock carts to carry equipment, procuring food for soldiers and fodder for animals, and recruiting servants and artisans to look after the soldiers.

Asoka also tried to hold his empire together by propagating *dhamma*, the principles of which, as we have seen, were simple and virtually universally applicable. This, according to him, would ensure the well-being of people in this world and the next. Special officers, known as the *dhamma mahamatta*, were appointed to spread the message of *dhamma*.

3.3 How important was the empire?

When historians began reconstructing early Indian history in the nineteenth century, the emergence of the Mauryan Empire was regarded as a major landmark. India was then under colonial rule, and was part of the British empire. Nineteenth and early twentieth century Indian historians found the possibility that there was an empire in early India both challenging and exciting. Also, some of the archaeological finds associated with the Mauryas, including stone sculpture, were considered to be examples of the spectacular art typical of empires. Many of these historians found the message on Asokan inscriptions very different from that of most other rulers, suggesting that Asoka was more powerful and industrious, as also more humble than later rulers who adopted grandiose titles. So it is not surprising that nationalist leaders in the twentieth century regarded him as an inspiring figure.

Yet, how important was the Mauryan Empire? It lasted for about 150 years, which is not a very long time in the vast span of the history of the subcontinent. Besides, if you look at Map 2, you will notice that the empire did not encompass the entire subcontinent. And even within the frontiers of the empire, control was not uniform. By the second century BCE, new chiefdoms and kingdoms emerged in several parts of the subcontinent.

4. NEW NOTIONS OF KINGSHIP

4.1 Chiefs and kings in the south

The new kingdoms that emerged in the Deccan and further south, including the chiefdoms of the Cholas, Cheras and Pandyas in Tamilakam (the name of the ancient Tamil country, which included parts of present-day Andhra Pradesh and Kerala, in addition to Tamil Nadu), proved to be stable and prosperous.

Chiefs and chiefdoms

A *chief* is a powerful man whose position may or may not be hereditary. He derives support from his kinfolk. His functions may include performing special rituals, leadership in warfare, and arbitrating disputes. He receives gifts from his subordinates (unlike kings who usually collect taxes) and often distributes these amongst his supporters. Generally, there are no regular armies and officials in chiefdoms.

We know about these states from a variety of sources. For instance, the early Tamil Sangam texts (see also Chapter 3) contain poems describing chiefs and the ways in which they acquired and distributed resources.

Many chiefs and kings, including the Satavahanas who ruled over parts of western and central India (*c.* second century BCE-second century CE) and the Shakas, a people of Central Asian origin who established kingdoms in the north-western and western parts of the subcontinent, derived revenues from long-distance trade. Their social origins were often obscure, but, as we will see in the case of the Satavahanas (Chapter 3), once they acquired power they attempted to claim social status in a variety of ways.

Source 2

Capturing elephants for the army

The *Arthashastra* lays down minute details of administrative and military organisation. This is what it says about how to capture elephants:

> Guards of elephant forests, assisted by those who rear elephants, those who enchain the legs of elephants, those who guard the boundaries, those who live in forests, as well as by those who nurse elephants, shall, with the help of five or seven female elephants to help in tethering wild ones, trace the whereabouts of herds of elephants by following the course of urine and dung left by elephants.

According to Greek sources, the Mauryan ruler had a standing army of 600,000 foot-soldiers, 30,000 cavalry and 9,000 elephants. Some historians consider these accounts to be exaggerated.

➲ If the Greek accounts were true, what kinds of resources do you think the Mauryan ruler would have required to maintain such a large army?

Source 3

The Pandya chief Senguttuvan visits the forest

This is an excerpt from the *Silappadikaram,* an epic written in Tamil:

(When he visited the forest) people came down the mountain, singing and dancing … just as the defeated show respect to the victorious king, so did they bring gifts – ivory, fragrant wood, fans made of the hair of deer, honey, sandalwood, red ochre, antimony, turmeric, cardamom, pepper, etc. … they brought coconuts, mangoes, medicinal plants, fruits, onions, sugarcane, flowers, areca nut, bananas, baby tigers, lions, elephants, monkeys, bear, deer, musk deer, fox, peacocks, musk cat, wild cocks, speaking parrots, etc. …

➲ Why did people bring these gifts? What would the chief have used these for?

4.2 Divine kings

One means of claiming high status was to identify with a variety of deities. This strategy is best exemplified by the Kushanas (*c.* first century BCE-first century CE), who ruled over a vast kingdom extending from Central Asia to northwest India. Their history has been reconstructed from inscriptions and textual traditions. The notions of kingship they wished to project are perhaps best evidenced in their coins and sculpture.

Colossal statues of Kushana rulers have been found installed in a shrine at Mat near Mathura (Uttar Pradesh). Similar statues have been found in a shrine in Afghanistan as well. Some historians feel this indicates that the Kushanas considered themselves godlike. Many Kushana rulers also adopted the title *devaputra*, or "son of god", possibly inspired by Chinese rulers who called themselves sons of heaven.

By the fourth century there is evidence of larger states, including the Gupta Empire. Many of these depended on *samantas*, men who maintained themselves through local resources including control over land. They offered homage and provided military support to rulers. Powerful *samantas* could become kings: conversely, weak rulers might find themselves being reduced to positions of subordination.

Histories of the Gupta rulers have been reconstructed from literature, coins and inscriptions, including *prashastis*, composed in praise of kings in particular, and patrons in general, by poets. While historians often attempt to draw factual information from such compositions, those who composed and read them often treasured them as works of poetry

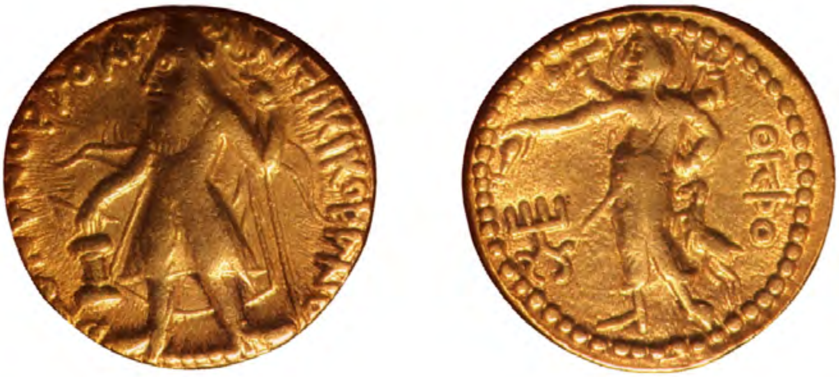


Fig. 2.4
A Kushana coin
Obverse: King Kanishka
Reverse: A deity

➲ How has the king been portrayed?

rather than as accounts that were literally true. The *Prayaga Prashasti* (also known as the Allahabad Pillar Inscription) composed in Sanskrit by Harishena, the court poet of Samudragupta, arguably the most powerful of the Gupta rulers (*c.* fourth century CE), is a case in point.

Source 4

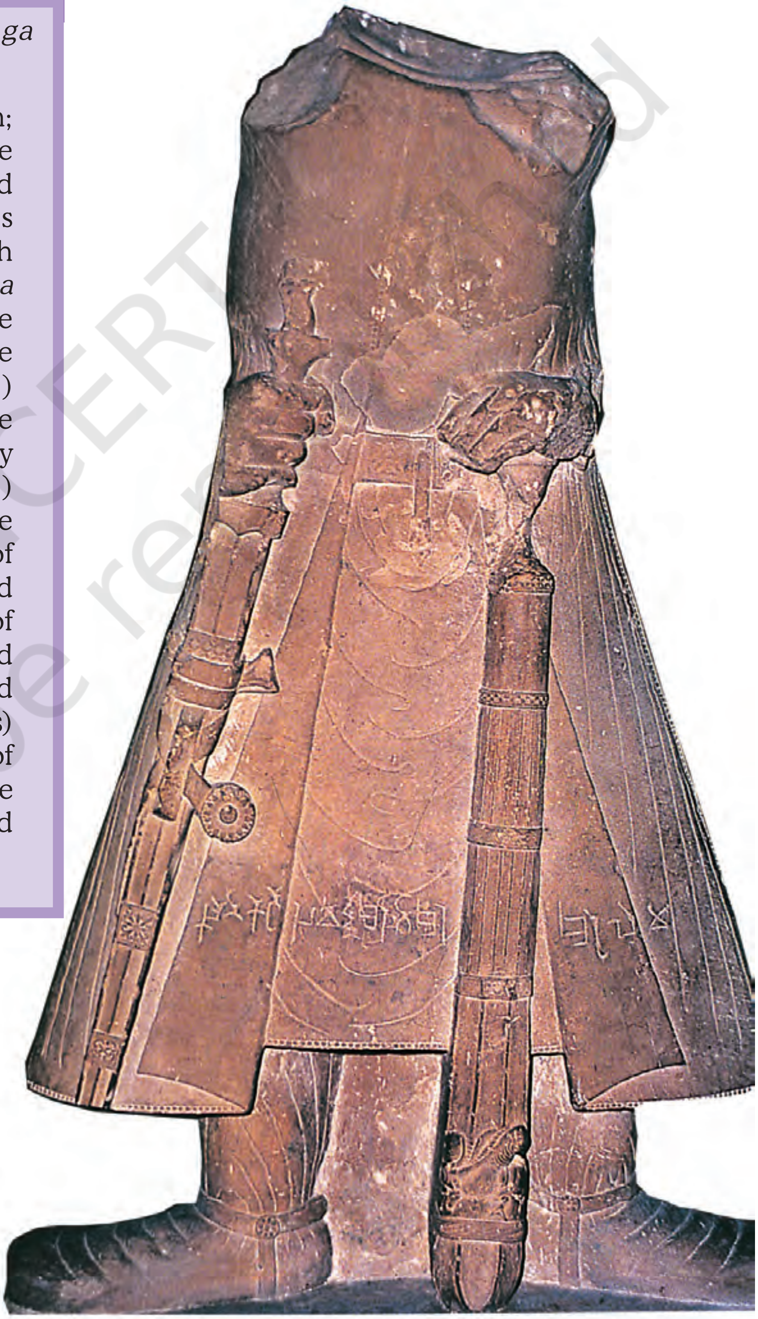
In praise of Samudragupta

This is an excerpt from the *Prayaga Prashasti:*

> He was without an antagonist on earth; he, by the overflowing of the multitude of (his) many good qualities adorned by hundreds of good actions, has wiped off the fame of other kings with the soles of (his) feet; (he is) *Purusha* (the Supreme Being), being the cause of the prosperity of the good and the destruction of the bad (he is) incomprehensible; (he is) one whose tender heart can be captured only by devotion and humility; (he is) possessed of compassion; (he is) the giver of many hundred-thousands of cows; (his) mind has received ceremonial initiation for the uplift of the miserable, the poor, the forlorn and the suffering; (he is) resplendent and embodied kindness to mankind; (he is) equal to (the gods) Kubera (the god of wealth), Varuna (the god of the ocean), Indra (the god of rains) and Yama (the god of death)…

Fig. 2.5
Sandstone sculpture of a Kushana king

➲ What are the elements in the sculpture that suggest that this is an image of a king?



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➲ Discuss...

Why do you think kings claimed divine status?

Source 5

The Sudarshana (beautiful) lake in Gujarat

Find Girnar on Map 2. The Sudarshana lake was an artificial reservoir. We know about it from a rock inscription (*c.* second century CE) in Sanskrit, composed to record the achievements of the Shaka ruler Rudradaman.

The inscription mentions that the lake, with embankments and water channels, was built by a local governor during the rule of the Mauryas. However, a terrible storm broke the embankments and water gushed out of the lake. Rudradaman, who was then ruling in the area, claimed to have got the lake repaired using his own resources, without imposing any tax on his subjects.

Another inscription on the same rock (*c.* fifth century) mentions how one of the rulers of the Gupta dynasty got the lake repaired once again.

➲ Why did rulers make arrangements for irrigation?

Transplantation is used for paddy cultivation in areas where water is plentiful. Here, seeds are first broadcast; when the saplings have grown they are transplanted in waterlogged fields. This ensures a higher ratio of survival of saplings and higher yields.

5. A CHANGING COUNTRYSIDE

5.1 Popular perceptions of kings

What did subjects think about their rulers? Obviously, inscriptions do not provide all the answers. In fact, ordinary people rarely left accounts of their thoughts and experiences. Nevertheless, historians have tried to solve this problem by examining stories contained in anthologies such as the *Jatakas* and the *Panchatantra*. Many of these stories probably originated as popular oral tales that were later committed to writing. The *Jatakas* were written in Pali around the middle of the first millennium CE.

One story known as the *Gandatindu Jataka* describes the plight of the subjects of a wicked king; these included elderly women and men, cultivators, herders, village boys and even animals. When the king went in disguise to find out what his subjects thought about him, each one of them cursed him for their miseries, complaining that they were attacked by robbers at night and by tax collectors during the day. To escape from this situation, people abandoned their village and went to live in the forest.

As this story indicates, the relationship between a king and his subjects, especially the rural population, could often be strained – kings frequently tried to fill their coffers by demanding high taxes, and peasants particularly found such demands oppressive. Escaping into the forest remained an option, as reflected in the *Jataka* story. Meanwhile, other strategies aimed at increasing production to meet growing demand for taxes also came to be adopted.

5.2 Strategies for increasing production

One such strategy was the shift to plough agriculture, which spread in fertile alluvial river valleys such as those of the Ganga and the Kaveri from *c.* sixth century BCE. The iron-tipped ploughshare was used to turn the alluvial soil in areas which had high rainfall. Moreover, in some parts of the Ganga valley, production of paddy was dramatically increased by the introduction of transplantation, although this meant back-breaking work for the producer.

While the iron ploughshare led to a growth in agricultural productivity, its use was restricted to certain parts of the subcontinent – cultivators in areas which were semi-arid, such as parts of Punjab and Rajasthan did not adopt it till the twentieth century, and those living in hilly tracts in the north-eastern and central parts of the subcontinent practised hoe agriculture, which was much better suited to the terrain.

Another strategy adopted to increase agricultural production was the use of irrigation, through wells and tanks, and less commonly, canals. Communities as well as individuals organised the construction of irrigation works. The latter, usually powerful men including kings, often recorded such activities in inscriptions.

5.3 Differences in rural society

While these technologies often led to an increase in production, the benefits were very uneven. What is evident is that there was a growing differentiation amongst people engaged in agriculture – stories, especially within the Buddhist tradition, refer to landless agricultural labourers, small peasants, as well as large landholders. The term *gahapati* was often used in Pali texts to designate the second and third categories. The large landholders, as well as the village headman (whose position was often hereditary), emerged as powerful figures, and often exercised control over other cultivators. Early Tamil literature (the Sangam texts) also mentions different categories of people living in the villages – large landowners or *vellalar*, ploughmen or *uzhavar* and slaves or *adimai.* It is likely that these differences were based on differential access to land, labour and some of the new technologies. In such a situation, questions of control over land must have become crucial, as these were often discussed in legal texts.

Gahapati

A *gahapati* was the owner, master or head of a household, who exercised control over the women, children, slaves and workers who shared a common residence. He was also the owner of the resources – land, animals and other things – that belonged to the household. Sometimes the term was used as a marker of status for men belonging to the urban elite, including wealthy merchants.

Source 6

The importance of boundaries

The *Manusmrti* is one of the best-known legal texts of early India, written in Sanskrit and compiled between *c.* second century BCE and *c.* second century CE. This is what the text advises the king to do:

> Seeing that in the world controversies constantly arise due to the ignorance of boundaries, he should … have … concealed boundary markers buried – stones, bones, cow's hair, chaff, ashes, potsherds, dried cow dung, bricks, coal, pebbles and sand. He should also have other similar substances that would not decay in the soil buried as hidden markers at the intersection of boundaries.

➲ Would these boundary markers have been adequate to resolve disputes?

Source 7

Life in a small village

The *Harshacharita* is a biography of Harshavardhana, the ruler of Kanauj (see Map 3), composed in Sanskrit by his court poet, Banabhatta (*c.* seventh century CE). This is an excerpt from the text, an extremely rare representation of life in a settlement on the outskirts of a forest in the Vindhyas:

> The outskirts being for the most part forest, many parcels of rice-land, threshing ground and arable land were being apportioned by small farmers … it was mainly spade culture … owing to the difficulty of ploughing the sparsely scattered fields covered with grass, with their few clear spaces, their black soil stiff as black iron …
>
> There were people moving along with bundles of bark … countless sacks of plucked flowers, … loads of flax and hemp bundles, quantities of honey, peacocks' tail feathers, wreaths of wax, logs, and grass. Village wives hastened en route for neighbouring villages, all intent on thoughts of sale and bearing on their heads baskets filled with various gathered forest fruits.

➲ How would you classify the people described in the text in terms of their occupations?

5.4 Land grants and new rural elites

From the early centuries of the Common Era, we find grants of land being made, many of which were recorded in inscriptions. Some of these inscriptions were on stone, but most were on copper plates (Fig. 2.13) which were probably given as a record of the transaction to those who received the land. The records that have survived are generally about grants to religious institutions or to Brahmanas. Most inscriptions were in Sanskrit. In some cases, and especially from the seventh century onwards, part of the inscription was in Sanskrit, while the rest was in a local language such as Tamil or Telugu. Let us look at one such inscription more closely.

Prabhavati Gupta was the daughter of one of the most important rulers in early Indian history, Chandragupta II (*c.* 375-415 CE). She was married into another important ruling family, that of the Vakatakas, who were powerful in the Deccan (see Map 3). According to Sanskrit legal texts, women were not supposed to have independent access to resources such as land. However, the inscription indicates that Prabhavati had access to land, which she then granted. This may have been because she was a queen (one of the few known from early Indian history), and her situation was therefore exceptional. It is also possible that the provisions of legal texts were not uniformly implemented.

The inscription also gives us an idea about rural populations – these included Brahmanas and peasants, as well as others who were expected to provide a range of produce to the king or his representatives. And according to the inscription, they would have to obey the new lord of the village, and perhaps pay him all these dues.

Land grants such as this one have been found in several parts of the country. There were regional variations in the sizes of land donated – ranging from small plots to vast stretches of uncultivated land – and the rights given to donees (the recipients of the grant). The impact of land grants is a subject of heated debate among historians. Some feel that land grants were part of a strategy adopted by ruling lineages to extend agriculture to new areas. Others suggest that land grants were indicative of weakening political power: as kings were losing control over their *samantas*, they tried to win allies by making grants of land. They also feel that kings tried to project themselves as supermen (as we saw in the previous section) *because* they were losing control: they wanted to present at least a façade of power.

Source 8

Prabhavati Gupta and the village of Danguna

This is what Prabhavati Gupta states in her inscription:

> Prabhavati Gupta … commands the *gramakutumbinas* (householders/peasants living in the village), Brahmanas and others living in the village of Danguna …
>
> "Be it known to you that on the twelfth (lunar day) of the bright (fortnight) of Karttika, we have, in order to increase our religious merit donated this village with the pouring out of water, to the Acharya (teacher) Chanalasvamin … You should obey all (his) commands …
>
> We confer on (him) the following exemptions typical of an *agrahara …*(this village is) not to be entered by soldiers and policemen; (it is) exempt from (the obligation to provide) grass, (animal) hides as seats, and charcoal (to touring royal officers); exempt from (the royal prerogative of) purchasing fermenting liquors and digging (salt); exempt from (the right to) mines and *khadira* trees; exempt from (the obligation to supply) flowers and milk; (it is donated) together with (the right to) hidden treasures and deposits (and) together with major and minor taxes …"
>
> This charter has been written in the thirteenth (regnal) year. (It has been) engraved by Chakradasa.

➲ What were the things produced in the village?

An *agrahara* was land granted to a Brahmana, who was usually exempted from paying land revenue and other dues to the king, and was often given the right to collect these dues from the local people.

Land grants provide some insight into the relationship between cultivators and the state. However, there were people who were often beyond the reach of officials or *samantas:* pastoralists, fisherfolk and hunter-gatherers, mobile or semi-sedentary artisans and shifting cultivators. Generally, such groups did not keep detailed records of their lives and transactions.

➲ Discuss...

Find out whether plough agriculture, irrigation and transplantation are prevalent in your state. If not, are there any alternative systems in use?

The history of Pataliputra

Each city had a history of its own. Pataliputra, for instance, began as a village known as Pataligrama. Then, in the fifth century BCE, the Magadhan rulers decided to shift their capital from Rajagaha to this settlement and renamed it. By the fourth century BCE, it was the capital of the Mauryan Empire and one of the largest cities in Asia. Subsequently, its importance apparently declined. When the Chinese pilgrim Xuan Zang visited the city in the seventh century CE, he found it in ruins, and with a very small population.

6. TOWNS AND TRADE

6.1 New cities

Let us retrace our steps back to the urban centres that emerged in several parts of the subcontinent from *c.* sixth century BCE. As we have seen, many of these were capitals of *mahajanapadas*. Virtually all major towns were located along routes of communication. Some such as Pataliputra were on riverine routes. Others, such as Ujjayini, were along land routes, and yet others, such as Puhar, were near the coast, from where sea routes began. Many cities like Mathura were bustling centres of commercial, cultural and political activity.

6.2 Urban populations: Elites and craftspersons

We have seen that kings and ruling elites lived in fortified cities. Although it is difficult to conduct extensive excavations at most sites because people live in these areas even today (unlike the Harappan cities), a wide range of artefacts have been recovered from them. These include fine pottery bowls and dishes, with a glossy finish, known as Northern Black Polished Ware, probably used by rich people, and ornaments, tools, weapons, vessels, figurines, made of a wide range of materials – gold, silver, copper, bronze, ivory, glass, shell and terracotta.

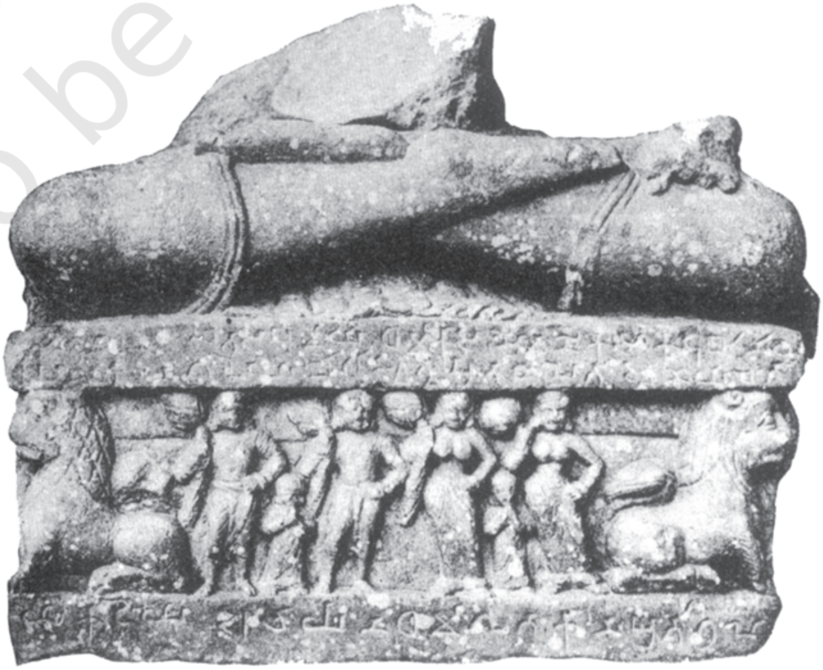
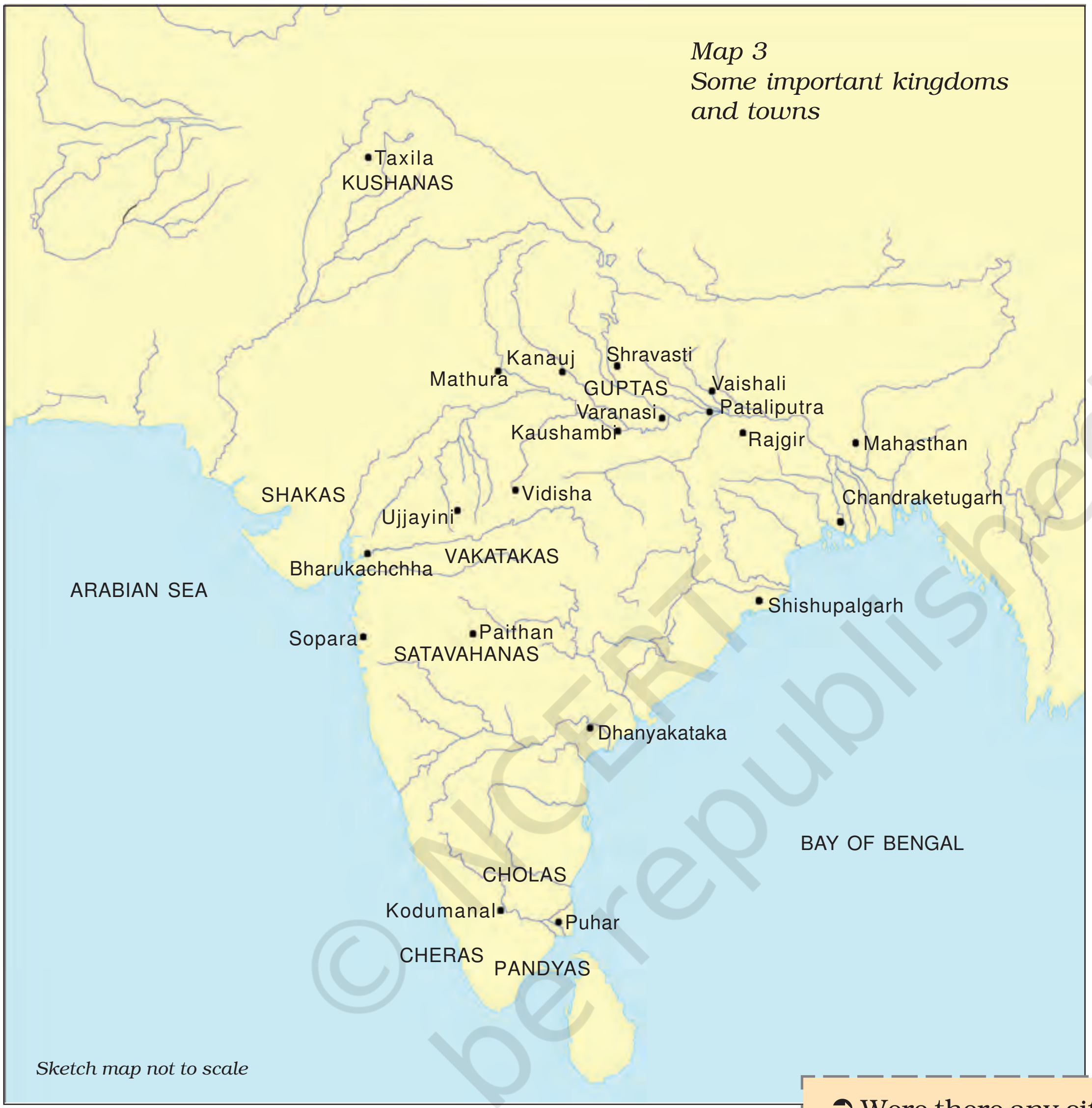


Fig. 2.6
The gift of an image
This is part of an image from Mathura. On the pedestal is a Prakrit inscription, mentioning that a woman named Nagapiya, the wife of a goldsmith (*sovanika*) named Dharmaka, installed this image in a shrine.


Map 3
Some important kingdoms and towns
Taxila
KUSHANAS
Kanauj
Shravasti
Mathura
GUPTAS
Vaishali
Pataliputra
Varanasi
Kaushambi
Rajgir
Mahasthan
SHAKAS
Vidisha
Ujjayini
Chandraketugarh
Bharukachchha
VAKATAKAS
ARABIAN SEA
Shishupalgarh
Sopara
Paithan
SATAVAHANAS
Dhanyakataka
BAY OF BENGAL
CHOLAS
Kodumanal
Puhar
CHERAS
PANDYAS
Sketch map not to scale

By the second century BCE, we find short votive inscriptions in a number of cities. These mention the name of the donor, and sometimes specify his/her occupation as well. They tell us about people who lived in towns: washing folk, weavers, scribes, carpenters, potters, goldsmiths, blacksmiths, officials, religious teachers, merchants and kings.

Sometimes, guilds or *shrenis*, organisations of craft producers and merchants, are mentioned as well. These guilds probably procured raw materials, regulated production, and marketed the finished product. It is likely that craftspersons used a range of iron tools to meet the growing demands of urban elites.

➲ Were there any cities in the region where the Harappan civilisation flourished in the third millennium BCE?

Votive inscriptions record gifts made to religious institutions.

Source 9

The Malabar coast (present-day Kerala)

Here is an excerpt from *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, composed by an anonymous Greek sailor (*c.* first century CE):

> They (i.e. traders from abroad) send large ships to these market-towns on account of the great quantity and bulk of pepper and malabathrum (possibly cinnamon, produced in these regions). There are imported here, in the first place, a great quantity of coin; topaz … antimony (a mineral used as a colouring substance), coral, crude glass, copper, tin, lead … There is exported pepper, which is produced in quantity in only one region near these markets … Besides this there are exported great quantities of fine pearls, ivory, silk cloth, … transparent stones of all kinds, diamonds and sapphires, and tortoise shell.

Archaeological evidence of a bead-making industry, using precious and semi-precious stones, has been found in Kodumanal (Tamil Nadu). It is likely that local traders brought the stones mentioned in the *Periplus* from sites such as these to the coastal ports.

➲ Why did the author compile this list?

"Periplus" is a Greek word meaning sailing around and *"Erythraean"* was the Greek name for the Red Sea.

6.3 Trade in the subcontinent and beyond

From the sixth century BCE, land and river routes criss-crossed the subcontinent and extended in various directions – overland into Central Asia and beyond, and overseas, from ports that dotted the coastline – extending across the Arabian Sea to East and North Africa and West Asia, and through the Bay of Bengal to Southeast Asia and China. Rulers often attempted to control these routes, possibly by offering protection for a price.

Those who traversed these routes included peddlers who probably travelled on foot and merchants who travelled with caravans of bullock carts and pack-animals. Also, there were seafarers, whose ventures were risky but highly profitable. Successful merchants, designated as *masattuvan* in Tamil and *setthis* and *satthavahas* in Prakrit, could become enormously rich. A wide range of goods were carried from one place to another – salt, grain, cloth, metal ores and finished products, stone, timber, medicinal plants, to name a few. Spices, especially pepper, were in high demand in the Roman Empire, as were textiles and medicinal plants, and these were all transported across the Arabian Sea to the Mediterranean.

6.4 Coins and kings

To some extent, exchanges were facilitated by the introduction of coinage. Punch-marked coins made of silver and copper (*c.* sixth century BCE onwards) were amongst the earliest to be minted and used. These have been recovered from excavations at a number of sites throughout the subcontinent. Numismatists have studied these and other coins to reconstruct possible commercial networks.

Attempts made to identify the symbols on punch-marked coins with specific ruling dynasties, including the Mauryas, suggest that these were issued by kings. It is also likely that merchants, bankers and townspeople issued some of these coins. The first coins to bear the names and images of rulers were issued by the Indo-Greeks, who established control over the north-western part of the subcontinent *c.* second century BCE.

The kushanas, however, issued the largest hoards of gold coins first gold coins *c.* first century CE. These were virtually identical in weight with those issued by contemporary Roman emperors and the Parthian rulers of Iran, and have been found from several sites in north India and Central Asia. The widespread use of gold coins indicates the enormous value of the transactions that were taking place. Besides, hoards of Roman coins have been found from archaeological sites in south India. It is obvious that networks of trade were not confined within political boundaries: south India was not part of the Roman Empire, but there were close connections through trade.

Coins were also issued by tribal republics such as that of the Yaudheyas of Punjab and Haryana (*c.* first century CE). Archaeologists have unearthed several thousand copper coins issued by the Yaudheyas, pointing to the latter's interest and participation in economic exchanges.

Some of the most spectacular gold coins were issued by the Gupta rulers. The earliest issues are remarkable for their purity. These coins facilitated long-distance transactions from which kings also benefited.

From *c.* sixth century CE onwards, finds of gold coins taper off. Does this indicate that there was some kind of an economic crisis? Historians are divided on this issue. Some suggest that with the collapse of the Western Roman Empire long-distance trade declined, and this affected the prosperity of the states, communities and regions that had benefited from it. Others argue that new towns and networks of trade started emerging around this time. They also point out that though finds of coins of that time are fewer, coins continue to be mentioned in inscriptions and texts. Could it be that there are fewer finds because coins were in circulation rather than being hoarded?

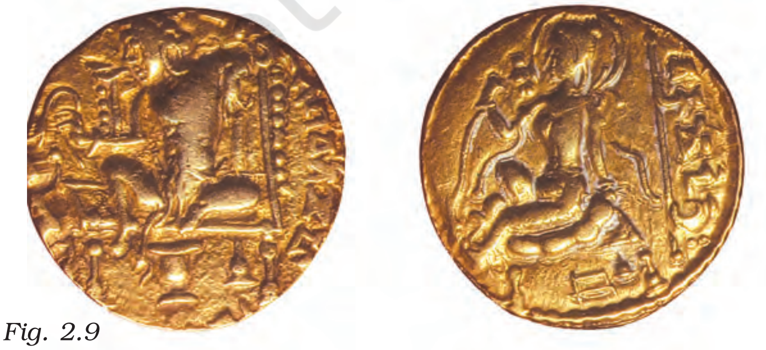


Fig. 2.9
A Gupta coin

Numismatics is the study of coins, including visual elements such as scripts and images, metallurgical analysis and the contexts in which they have been found.

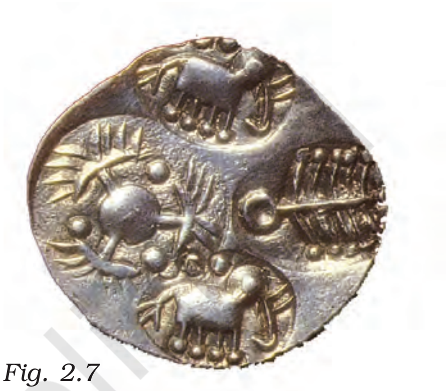


Fig. 2.7
A punch-marked coin, so named because symbols were punched or stamped onto the metal surface

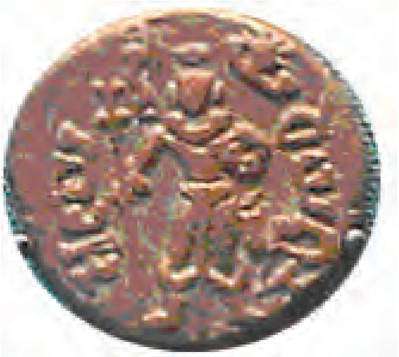


Fig. 2.8
A Yaudheya coin

➲ Discuss...

What are the transactions involved in trade? Which of these transactions are apparent from the sources mentioned? Are there any that are not evident from the sources?

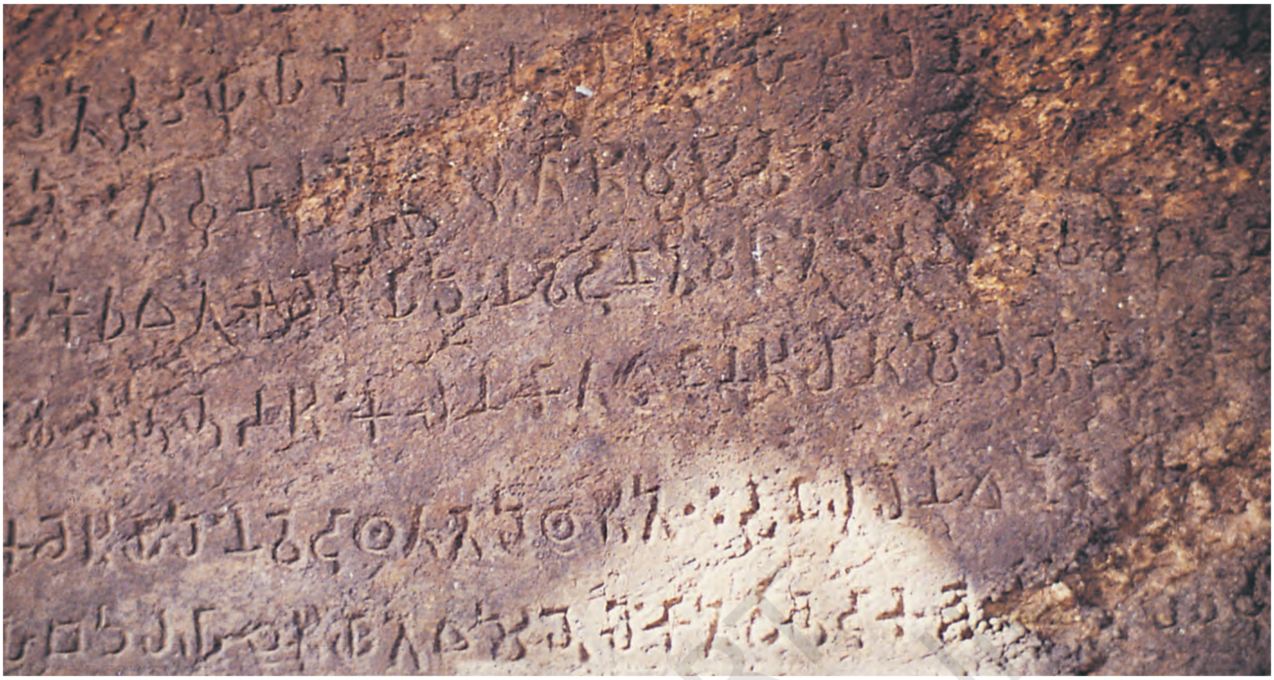


Fig. 2.10
An Asokan inscription

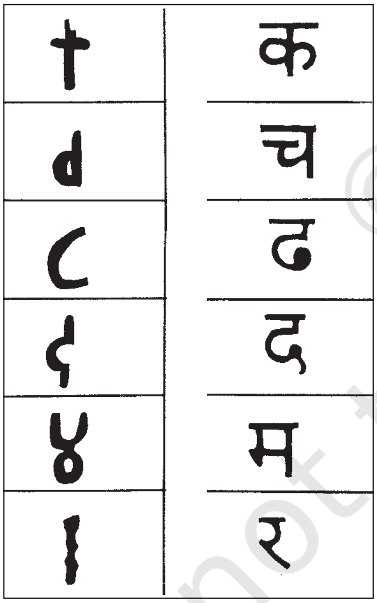


Fig. 2.11
Asokan Brahmi with Devanagari equivalents

➲ Do some Devanagari letters appear similar to Brahmi? Are there any that seem different?

7. BACK TO BASICS

HOW ARE INSCRIPTIONS DECIPHERED?

So far, we have been studying excerpts from inscriptions amongst other things. But how do historians find out what is written on them?

7.1 Deciphering Brahmi

Most scripts used to write modern Indian languages are derived from Brahmi, the script used in most Asokan inscriptions. From the late eighteenth century, European scholars aided by Indian pandits worked backwards from contemporary Bengali and Devanagari (the script used to write Hindi) manuscripts, comparing their letters with older specimens.

Scholars who studied early inscriptions sometimes assumed these were in Sanskrit, although the earliest inscriptions were, in fact, in Prakrit. It was only after decades of painstaking investigations by several epigraphists that James Prinsep was able to decipher Asokan Brahmi in 1838.

7.2 How Kharosthi was read

The story of the decipherment of Kharosthi, the script used in inscriptions in the northwest, is different. Here, finds of coins of Indo-Greek kings who ruled over the area (*c.* second-first centuries BCE) have facilitated matters. These coins contain the names of kings written in Greek and Kharosthi scripts. European scholars who could read the former compared the letters. For instance, the symbol for “a” could be found in both scripts for writing names such as Apollodotus. With Prinsep identifying the language of the Kharosthi inscriptions as Prakrit, it became possible to read longer inscriptions as well.

7.3 Historical evidence from inscriptions

To find out how epigraphists and historians work, let us look at two Asokan inscriptions more closely.

Note that the name of the ruler, Asoka, is not mentioned in the inscription (Source 10). What is used instead are titles adopted by the ruler – *devanampiya*, often translated as “beloved of the gods” and *piyadassi*, or “pleasant to behold”. The name Asoka is mentioned in some other inscriptions, which also contain these titles. After examining all these inscriptions, and finding that they match in terms of content, style, language and palaeography, epigraphists have concluded that they were issued by the same ruler.

You may also have noticed that Asoka claims that earlier rulers had no arrangements to receive reports. If you consider the political history of the subcontinent prior to Asoka, do you think this statement is true? Historians have to constantly assess statements made in inscriptions to judge whether they are true, plausible or exaggerations.

Did you notice that there are words within brackets? Epigraphists sometimes add these to make the meaning of sentences clear. This has to be done carefully, to ensure that the intended meaning of the author is not changed.

Source 10

The orders of the king

Thus speaks king Devanampiya Piyadassi:

> In the past, there were no arrangements for disposing affairs, nor for receiving regular reports. But I have made the following (arrangement). *Pativedakas* should report to me about the affairs of the people at all times, anywhere, whether I am eating, in the inner apartment, in the bedroom, in the cow pen, being carried (possibly in a palanquin), or in the garden. And I will dispose of the affairs of the people everywhere.

➲ Epigraphists have translated the term *pativedaka* as reporter. In what ways would the functions of the *pativedaka* have been different from those we generally associate with reporters today?

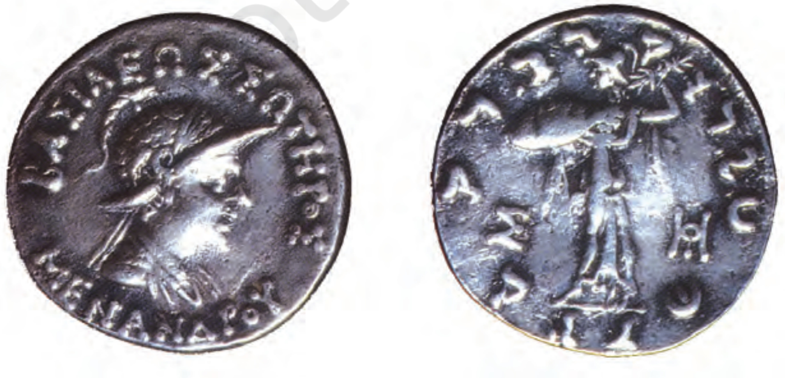


Fig. 2.12
A coin of the Indo-Greek king Menander

Source 11

The anguish of the king

When the king Devanampiya Piyadassi had been ruling for eight years, the (country of the) Kalingas (present-day coastal Orissa) was conquered by (him).

One hundred and fifty thousand men were deported, a hundred thousand were killed, and many more died.

After that, now that (the country of) the Kalingas has been taken, Devanampiya (is devoted) to an intense study of Dhamma, to the love of Dhamma, and to instructing (the people) in Dhamma.

This is the repentance of Devanampiya on account of his conquest of the (country of the) Kalingas.

For this is considered very painful and deplorable by Devanampiya that, while one is conquering an unconquered (country) slaughter, death and deportation of people (take place) there …

➲ Discuss...

Look at Map 2 and discuss the location of Asokan inscriptions. Do you notice any patterns?

Historians have to make other assessments as well. If a king's orders were inscribed on natural rocks near cities or important routes of communication, would passers-by have stopped to read these? Most people were probably not literate. Did everybody throughout the subcontinent understand the Prakrit used in Pataliputra? Would the orders of the king have been followed? Answers to such questions are not always easy to find.

Some of these problems are evident if we look at an Asokan inscription (Source 11), which has often been interpreted as reflecting the anguish of the ruler, as well as marking a change in his attitude towards warfare. As we shall see, the situation becomes more complex once we move beyond reading the inscription at face value.

While Asokan inscriptions have been found in present-day Orissa, the one depicting his anguish is missing. In other words, the inscription has not been found in the region that was conquered. What are we to make of that? Is it that the anguish of the recent conquest was too painful in the region, and therefore the ruler was unable to address the issue?

8. THE LIMITATIONS OF INSCRIPTIONAL EVIDENCE

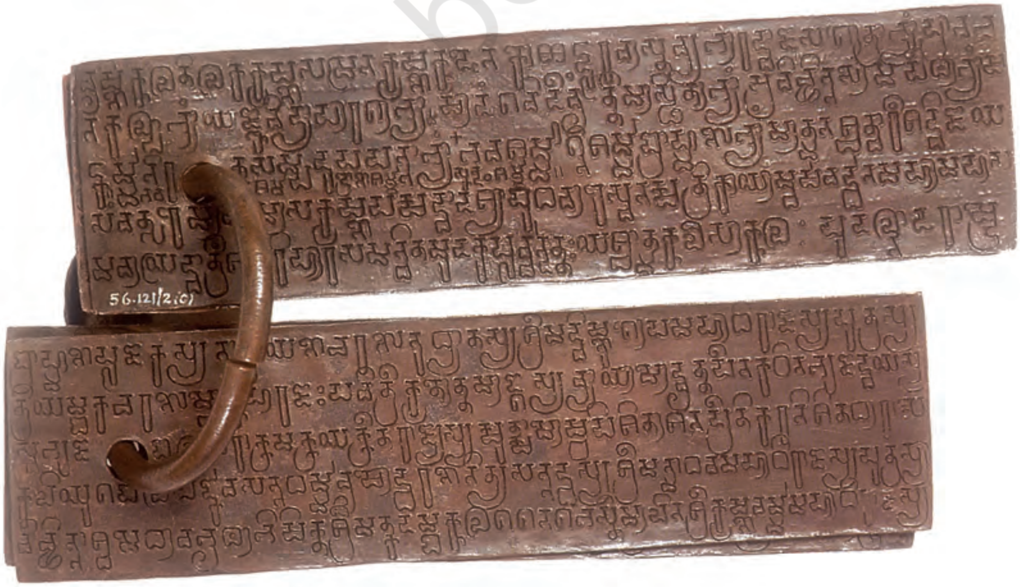
By now it is probably evident that there are limits to what epigraphy can reveal. Sometimes, there are technical limitations: letters are very faintly engraved, and thus reconstructions are uncertain. Also, inscriptions may be damaged or letters missing. Besides, it is not always easy to be sure about the exact meaning of the words used in inscriptions, some of which may be specific to a particular place or time. If you go through an epigraphical journal (some are listed in Timeline 2), you will realise that scholars are constantly debating and discussing alternative ways of reading inscriptions.

Although several thousand inscriptions have been discovered, not all have been deciphered, published and translated. Besides, many more inscriptions must have existed, which have not survived the ravages of time. So what is available at present is probably only a fraction of what was inscribed.

There is another, perhaps more fundamental, problem: not everything that we may consider politically or economically significant was necessarily recorded in inscriptions. For instance, routine agricultural practices and the joys and sorrows of daily existence find no mention in inscriptions, which focus, more often than not, on grand, unique events. Besides, the content of inscriptions almost invariably projects the perspective of the person(s) who commissioned them. As such, they need to be juxtaposed with other perspectives so as to arrive at a better understanding of the past.

Thus epigraphy alone does not provide a full understanding of political and economic history. Also, historians often question both old and new evidence. Scholars in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were primarily interested in the histories of kings. From the mid-twentieth century onwards, issues such as economic change, and the ways in which different social groups emerged have assumed far more importance. Recent decades have seen a much greater preoccupation with histories of marginalised groups. This will probably lead to fresh investigations of old sources, and the development of new strategies of analysis.

Fig. 2.13
A copperplate inscription from Karnataka, c. sixth century CE



TIMELINE 1

MAJOR POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENTS

*c.*600-500 BCE	Paddy transplantation; urbanisation in the Ganga valley; *mahajanapadas*; punch-marked coins
c. 500-400 BCE	Rulers of Magadha consolidate power
c. 327-325 BCE	Invasion of Alexander of Macedon
c. 321 BCE	Accession of Chandragupta Maurya
c. 272/268-231 BCE	Reign of Asoka
c. 185 BCE	End of the Mauryan empire
c. 200-100 BCE	Indo-Greek rule in the northwest; Cholas, Cheras and Pandyas in south India; Satavahanas in the Deccan
c. 100 BCE-200 CE	Shaka (peoples from Central Asia) rulers in the northwest; Roman trade; gold coinage
c. 78 CE?	Accession of Kanishka
*c.*100-200 CE	Earliest inscriptional evidence of land grants by Satavahana and Shaka rulers
c. 320 CE	Beginning of Gupta rule
c. 335-375 CE	Samudragupta
c. 375-415 CE	Chandragupta II; Vakatakas in the Deccan
c. 500-600 CE	Rise of the Chalukyas in Karnataka and of the Pallavas in Tamil Nadu
c. 606-647 CE	Harshavardhana king of Kanauj; Chinese pilgrim Xuan Zang comes in search of Buddhist texts
c. 712	Arabs conquer Sind

(Note: It is difficult to date economic developments precisely. Also, there are enormous subcontinental variations which have not been indicated in the timeline. Only the earliest dates for specific developments have been given. The date of Kanishka's accession is not certain and this has been marked with a '?')

TIMELINE 2
MAJOR ADVANCES IN EPIGRAPHY

Eighteenth century

1784	Founding of the Asiatic Society (Bengal)

Nineteenth century

1810s	Colin Mackenzie collects over 8,000 inscriptions in Sanskrit and Dravidian languages
1838	Decipherment of Asokan Brahmi by James Prinsep
1877	Alexander Cunningham publishes a set of Asokan inscriptions
1886	First issue of *Epigraphia Carnatica*, a journal of south Indian inscriptions
1888	First issue of *Epigraphia Indica*

Twentieth century

1965-66	D.C. Sircar publishes *Indian Epigraphy* and *Indian Epigraphical Glossary*

ANSWER IN 100-150 WORDS

1. Discuss the evidence of craft production in Early Historic cities. In what ways is this different from the evidence from Harappan cities?
2. Describe the salient features of *mahajanapadas.*
3. How do historians reconstruct the lives of ordinary people?
4. Compare and contrast the list of things given to the Pandyan chief (Source 3) with those produced in the village of Danguna (Source 8). Do you notice any similarities or differences?
5. List some of the problems faced by epigraphists.

WRITE A SHORT ESSAY (ABOUT 500 WORDS) ON THE FOLLOWING:

6. Discuss the main features of Mauryan administration. Which of these elements are evident in the Asokan inscriptions that you have studied?

7. This is a statement made by one of the best-known epigraphists of the twentieth century, D.C. Sircar: "There is no aspect of life, culture and activities of the Indians that is not reflected in inscriptions." Discuss.

8. Discuss the notions of kingship that developed in the post-Mauryan period.

9. To what extent were agricultural practices transformed in the period under consideration?

MAP WORK

10. Compare Maps 1 and 2, and list the *mahajanapadas* that might have been included in the Mauryan Empire. Are any Asokan inscriptions found in these areas?

PROJECT (ANY ONE)

11. Collect newspapers for one month. Cut and paste all the statements made by government officials about public works. Note what the reports say about the resources required for such projects, how the resources are mobilised and the objective of the project. Who issues these statements, and how and why are they communicated? Compare and contrast these with the evidence from inscriptions discussed in this chapter. What are the similarities and differences that you notice?

12. Collect five different kinds of currency notes and coins in circulation today. For each one of these, describe what you see on the obverse and the reverse (the front and the back). Prepare a report on the common features as well as the differences in terms of pictures, scripts and languages, size, shape and any other element that you find significant. Compare these with the coins shown in this chapter, discussing the materials used, the techniques of minting, the visual symbols and their significance and the possible functions that coins may have had.

If you would like to know more, read:

D.N. Jha. 2004.
Early India: A Concise History.
Manohar, New Delhi.

R. Salomon. 1998.
Indian Epigraphy. Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd, New Delhi.

R.S. Sharma. 1983.
Material Culture and Social Formation in Early India.
Macmillan, New Delhi.

D.C. Sircar. 1975.
Inscriptions of Asoka.
Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, New Delhi.

Romila Thapar. 1997.
Asoka and the Decline of the Mauryas. Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

For more information, you could visit:
http:/projectsouthasia.sdstate.edu/Docs/index.html

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THEME THREE

KINSHIP, CASTE AND CLASS

EARLY SOCIETIES

(c. 600 BCE-600 CE)

In the previous chapter we saw that there were several changes in economic and political life between *c.* 600 BCE and 600 CE. Some of these changes influenced societies as well. For instance, the extension of agriculture into forested areas transformed the lives of forest dwellers; craft specialists often emerged as distinct social groups; the unequal distribution of wealth sharpened social differences.

Historians often use textual traditions to understand these processes. Some texts lay down norms of social behaviour; others describe and occasionally comment on a wide range of social situations and practices. We can also catch a glimpse of some social actors from inscriptions. As we will see, each text (and inscription) was written from the perspective of specific social categories. So we need to keep in mind *who* composed *what* and for *whom*. We also need to consider the language used, and the ways in which the text circulated. Used carefully, texts allow us to piece together attitudes and practices that shaped social histories.

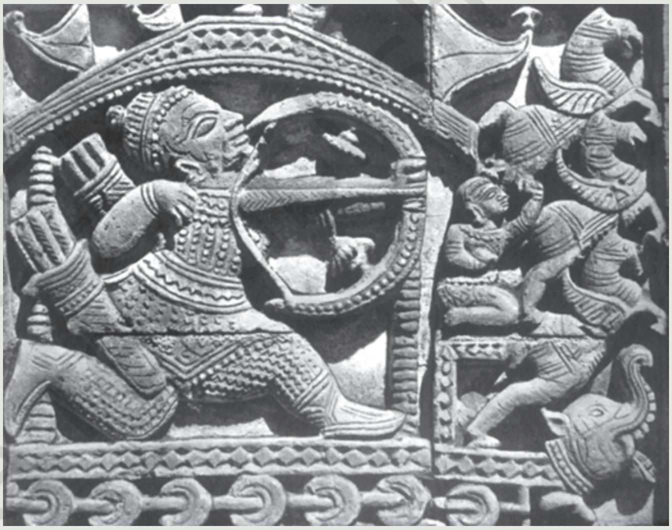

Fig. 3.1
A terracotta sculpture depicting a scene from the Mahabharata *(West Bengal),*
c. seventeenth century

In focusing on the *Mahabharata*, a colossal epic running in its present form into over 100,000 verses with depictions of a wide range of social categories and situations, we draw on one of the richest texts of the subcontinent. It was composed over a period of about 1,000 years (*c.* 500 BCE onwards), and some of the stories it contains may have been in circulation even earlier. The central story is about two sets of warring cousins. The text also contains sections laying down norms of behaviour for various social groups. Occasionally (though not always), the principal characters seem to follow these norms. What does conformity with norms and deviations from them signify?

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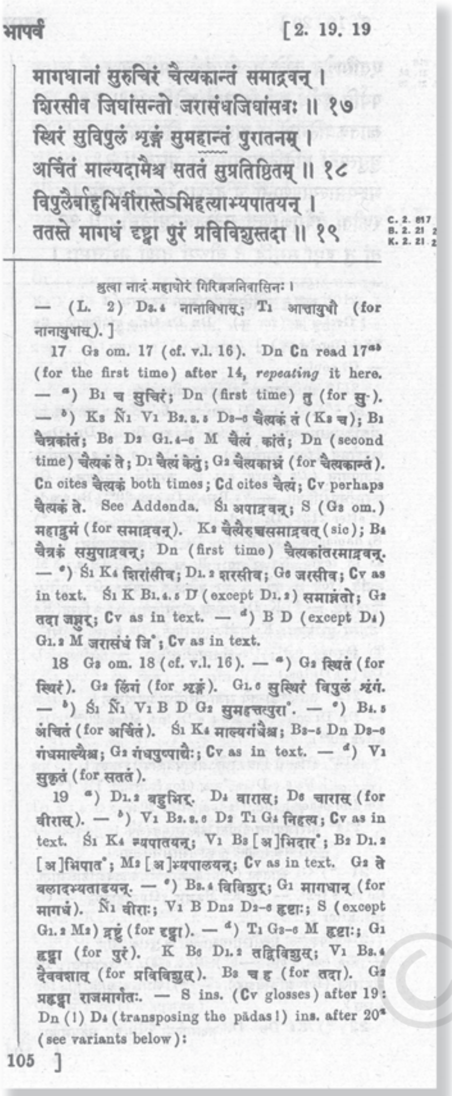


भापर्व [2. 19. 19

मागधानां सुरुचिरं चैत्यकान्तं समाद्रवन् ।
शिरसीव जिघांसन्तो जरासंधजिघांसवः ॥ १७
स्थिरं सुविपुलं शृङ्गं सुमहान्तं पुरातनम् ।
अर्चितं माल्यदामैश्च सततं सुप्रतिष्ठितम् ॥ १८
विपुलैर्बाहुभिर्वीरास्तेऽभिहत्याभ्यपातयन् ।
ततस्ते मागधं दृष्ट्वा पुरं प्रविविशुस्तदा ॥ १९

C. 2. 817
B. 2. 21
K. 2. 21

श्रुत्वा नादं महाघोरं गिरिव्रजनिवासिनः ।
— (L. 2) D$_{3.4}$ नानाविधास्; T$_1$ आचायुधौ (for नानायुधास्).]

17 G$_3$ om. 17 (cf. v.l. 16). Dn Cn read 17^{ab} (for the first time) after 14, *repeating* it here. — ^{a}) B$_1$ च सुचिरं; Dn (first time) तु (for सु-). — ^{b}) K$_3$ Ñ$_1$ V$_1$ B$_{2.3.5}$ D$_{3-6}$ चैत्यकं तं (K$_3$ च); B$_1$ चैत्रकांतं; B$_6$ D$_2$ G$_{1.4-6}$ M चैत्यं कांतं; Dn (second time) चैत्यकं ते; D$_1$ चैत्यं केतुं; G$_2$ चैत्यकाभ्रं (for चैत्यकान्तं). Cn cites चैत्यकं both times; Cd cites चैत्यं; Cv perhaps चैत्यकं ते. See Addenda. Ś$_1$ अपाद्रवन्; S (G$_3$ om.) महाद्रुमं (for समाद्रवन्). K$_2$ चैत्यैरुचसमाद्रवत् (sic); B$_4$ चैत्रकं समुपाद्रवन्; Dn (first time) चैत्यकांतरमाद्रवन्. — ^{c}) Ś$_1$ K$_4$ शिरांसीव; D$_{1.2}$ शरसीव; G$_6$ जरसीव; Cv as in text. Ś$_1$ K B$_{1.4.5}$ D (except D$_{1.2}$) समाघ्नंतो; G$_2$ तदा जघ्नुर्; Cv as in text. — ^{d}) B D (except D$_4$) G$_{1.2}$ M जरासंधं जि°; Cv as in text.

18 G$_3$ om. 18 (cf. v.l. 16). — ^{a}) G$_2$ स्थितं (for स्थिरं). G$_2$ लिंगं (for शृङ्गं). G$_{1.6}$ सुस्थिरं विपुलं शृंगं. — ^{b}) Ś$_1$ Ñ$_1$ V$_1$ B D G$_2$ सुमहत्तत्पुरा°. — ^{c}) B$_{4.5}$ अंचितं (for अर्चितं). Ś$_1$ K$_4$ माल्यगंधैश्च; B$_{3-5}$ Dn D$_{3-6}$ गंधमाल्यैश्च; G$_2$ गंधपुष्पाद्यैः; Cv as in text. — ^{d}) V$_1$ सुकृतं (for सततं).

19 ^{a}) D$_{1.2}$ बहुभिर्. D$_4$ वारास्; D$_6$ चारास् (for वीरास्). — ^{b}) V$_1$ B$_{2.3.6}$ D$_2$ T$_1$ G$_4$ निहत्य; Cv as in text. Ś$_1$ K$_4$ ऽभ्यपातयन्; V$_1$ B$_3$ [अ]भिदार°; B$_2$ D$_{1.2}$ [अ]भिपात°; M$_2$ [अ]भ्यपालयन्; Cv as in text. G$_2$ ते बलादभ्यताडयन्. — ^{c}) B$_{3.4}$ विविशुर्; G$_1$ मागधान् (for मागधं). Ñ$_1$ वीराः; V$_1$ B Dn$_2$ D$_{2-6}$ हृष्टाः; S (except G$_{1.2}$ M$_2$) द्रष्टुं (for दृष्ट्वा). — ^{d}) T$_1$ G$_{3-6}$ M हृष्टाः; G$_1$ हृष्ट्वा (for पुरं). K B$_6$ D$_{1.2}$ तद्विविशुस्; V$_1$ B$_{3.4}$ दैववशात् (for प्रविविशुस्). B$_3$ च ह (for तदा). G$_2$ प्रहृष्टा राजमार्गतः. — S ins. (Cv glosses) after 19: Dn (!) D$_4$ (transposing the pādas!) ins. after 20^{a} (see variants below):

105]

Fig. 3.2
A section of a page from the Critical Edition
The section printed in large bold letters is part of the main text. The smaller print lists variations in different manuscripts, which were carefully catalogued.

1. THE CRITICAL EDITION OF THE *MAHABHARATA*

One of the most ambitious projects of scholarship began in 1919, under the leadership of a noted Indian Sanskritist, V.S. Sukthankar. A team comprising dozens of scholars initiated the task of preparing a critical edition of the *Mahabharata.* What exactly did this involve? Initially, it meant collecting Sanskrit manuscripts of the text, written in a variety of scripts, from different parts of the country.

The team worked out a method of comparing verses from each manuscript. Ultimately, they selected the verses that appeared common to most versions and published these in several volumes, running into over 13,000 pages. The project took 47 years to complete. Two things became apparent: there were several common elements in the Sanskrit versions of the story, evident in manuscripts found all over the subcontinent, from Kashmir and Nepal in the north to Kerala and Tamil Nadu in the south. Also evident were enormous regional variations in the ways in which the text had been transmitted over the centuries. These variations were documented in footnotes and appendices to the main text. Taken together, more than half the 13,000 pages are devoted to these variations.

In a sense, these variations are reflective of the complex processes that shaped early (and later) social histories – through dialogues between dominant traditions and resilient local ideas and practices. These dialogues are characterised by moments of conflict as well as consensus.

Our understanding of these processes is derived primarily from texts written in Sanskrit by and for Brahmanas. When issues of social history were explored for the first time by historians in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they tended to take these texts at face value – believing that everything that was laid down in these texts was actually practised. Subsequently, scholars began studying other traditions, from works in Pali, Prakrit and Tamil. These studies indicated that the ideas contained in normative Sanskrit texts were on the whole recognised as authoritative: they were also questioned and occasionally even rejected. It is important to keep this in mind as we examine how historians reconstruct social histories.

2. KINSHIP AND MARRIAGE

MANY RULES AND VARIED PRACTICES

2.1 Finding out about families

We often take family life for granted. However, you may have noticed that not all families are identical: they vary in terms of numbers of members, their relationship with one another as well as the kinds of activities they share. Often people belonging to the same family share food and other resources, and live, work and perform rituals together. Families are usually parts of larger networks of people defined as relatives, or to use a more technical term, *kinfolk*. While familial ties are often regarded as "natural" and based on blood, they are defined in many different ways. For instance, some societies regard cousins as being blood relations, whereas others do not.

For early societies, historians can retrieve information about elite families fairly easily; it is, however, far more difficult to reconstruct the familial relationships of ordinary people. Historians also investigate and analyse *attitudes* towards family and kinship. These are important, because they provide an insight into people's thinking; it is likely that some of these ideas would have shaped their actions, just as actions may have led to changes in attitudes.

Terms for family and kin

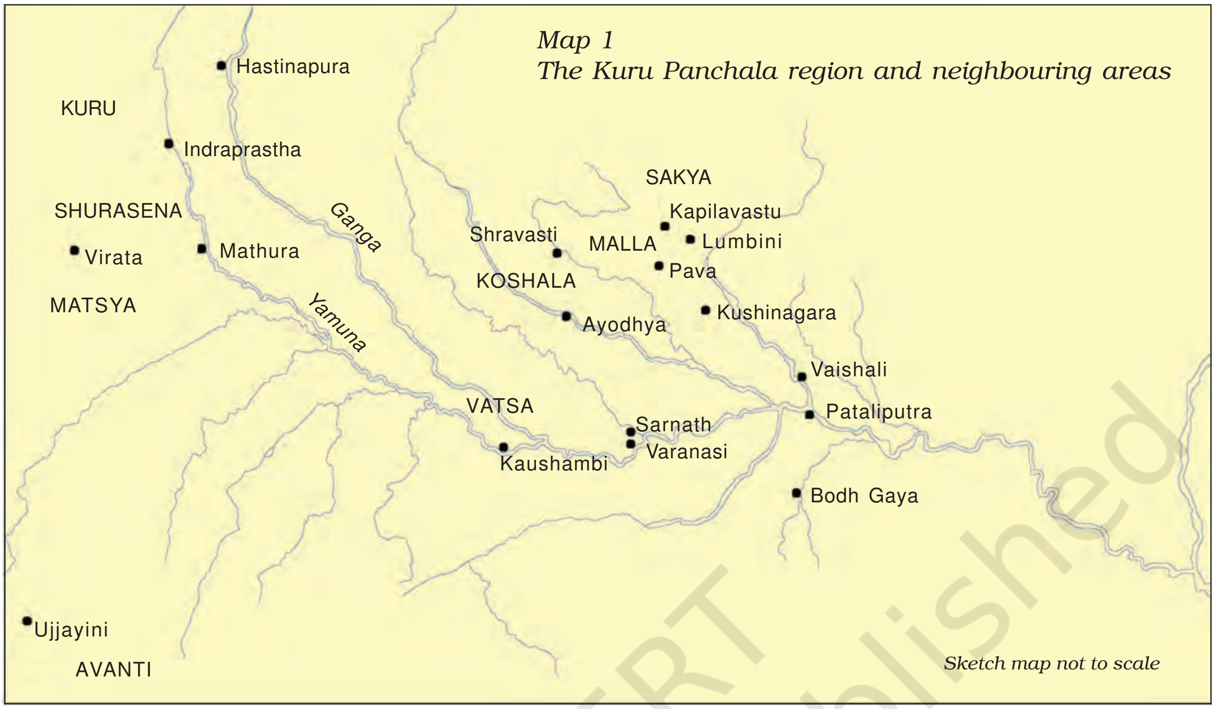
Sanskrit texts use the term *kula* to designate families and *jnati* for the larger network of kinfolk. The term *vamsha* is used for lineage.

2.2 The ideal of patriliny

Can we identify points when kinship relations changed? At one level, the *Mahabharata* is a story about this. It describes a feud over land and power between two groups of cousins, the Kauravas and the Pandavas, who belonged to a single ruling family, that of the Kurus, a lineage dominating one of the *janapadas* (Chapter 2, Map 1). Ultimately, the conflict ended in a battle, in which the Pandavas emerged victorious. After that, patrilineal succession was proclaimed. While patriliny had existed prior to the composition of the epic, the central story of the *Mahabharata* reinforced the idea that it was valuable. Under patriliny, sons could claim the resources (including the throne in the case of kings) of their fathers when the latter died.

Most ruling dynasties (*c.* sixth century BCE onwards) claimed to follow this system, although there were variations in practice: sometimes there were no sons,

Patriliny means tracing descent from father to son, grandson and so on.
Matriliny is the term used when descent is traced through the mother.


KURU
Hastinapura
Indraprastha
SHURASENA
Virata
Mathura
MATSYA
Ganga
Yamuna
SAKYA
Kapilavastu
Lumbini
Shravasti
MALLA
Pava
KOSHALA
Ayodhya
Kushinagara
Vaishali
Pataliputra
VATSA
Sarnath
Varanasi
Kaushambi
Bodh Gaya
Ujjayini
AVANTI
Sketch map not to scale

Map 1
The Kuru Panchala region and neighbouring areas

in some situations brothers succeeded one another, sometimes other kinsmen claimed the throne, and, in very exceptional circumstances, women such as Prabhavati Gupta (Chapter 2) exercised power.

The concern with patriliny was not unique to ruling families. It is evident in mantras in ritual texts such as the *Rigveda*. It is possible that these attitudes were shared by wealthy men and those who claimed high status, including Brahmanas.

Source 1

Producing "fine sons"

Here is an excerpt of a mantra from the *Rigveda*, which was probably inserted in the text *c.* 1000 BCE, to be chanted by the priest while conducting the marriage ritual. It is used in many Hindu weddings even today:

> I free her from here, but not from there. I have bound her firmly there, so that through the grace of Indra she will have fine sons and be fortunate in her husband's love.

Indra was one of the principal deities, a god of valour, warfare and rain. "Here" and "there" refer to the father's and husband's house respectively.

➲ In the context of the mantra, discuss the implications of marriage from the point of view of the bride and groom. Are the implications identical, or are there differences?

Source 2

Why kinfolk quarrelled

This is an excerpt from the *Adi Parvan* (literally, the first section) of the Sanskrit *Mahabharata*, describing why conflicts arose amongst the Kauravas and Pandavas:

> The Kauravas were the … sons of Dhritarashtra, and the Pandavas … were their cousins. Since Dhritarashtra was blind, his younger brother Pandu ascended the throne of Hastinapura (see Map 1) … However, after the premature death of Pandu, Dhritarashtra became king, as the royal princes were still very young. As the princes grew up together, the citizens of Hastinapura began to express their preference for the Pandavas, for they were more capable and virtuous than the Kauravas. This made Duryodhana, the eldest of the Kauravas, jealous. He approached his father and said, "You yourself did not receive the throne, although it fell to you, because of your defect. If the Pandava receives the patrimony from Pandu, his son will surely inherit it in turn, and so will his son, and his. We ourselves with our sons shall be excluded from the royal succession and become of slight regard in the eyes of the world, lord of the earth!"

Passages such as these may not have been literally true, but they give us an idea about what those who wrote the text thought. Sometimes, as in this case, they contain conflicting ideas.

➲ Read the passage and list the different criteria suggested for becoming king. Of these, how important was birth in a particular family? Which of these criteria seem justified? Are there any that strike you as unjust?

2.3 Rules of marriage

While sons were important for the continuity of the patrilineage, daughters were viewed rather differently within this framework. They had no claims to the resources of the household. At the same time, marrying them into families outside the kin was considered desirable. This system, called exogamy (literally, marrying outside), meant that the lives of young girls and women belonging to families that claimed high status were often carefully regulated to ensure that they were married at the "right" time and to the "right" person. This gave rise to the belief that *kanyadana* or the gift of a daughter in marriage was an important religious duty of the father.

With the emergence of new towns (Chapter 2), social life became more complex. People from near

Types of marriages

Endogamy refers to marriage within a unit – this could be a kin group, caste, or a group living in the same locality.

Exogamy refers to marriage outside the unit.

Polygyny is the practice of a man having several wives.

Polyandry is the practice of a woman having several husbands.

Source 3

Eight forms of marriage

Here are the first, fourth, fifth and sixth forms of marriage from the *Manusmriti:*

First: The gift of a daughter, after dressing her in costly clothes and honouring her with presents of jewels, to a man learned in the Veda whom the father himself invites.

Fourth: The gift of a daughter by the father after he has addressed the couple with the text, "May both of you perform your duties together", and has shown honour to the bridegroom.

Fifth: When the bridegroom receives a maiden, after having given as much wealth as he can afford to the kinsmen and to the bride herself, according to his own will.

Sixth: The voluntary union of a maiden and her lover … which springs from desire …

➲ For each of the forms, discuss whether the decision about the marriage was taken by
(a) the bride,
(b) the bridegroom,
(c) the father of the bride,
(d) the father of the bridegroom,
(e) any other person.

and far met to buy and sell their products and share ideas in the urban milieu. This may have led to a questioning of earlier beliefs and practices (see also Chapter 4). Faced with this challenge, the Brahmanas responded by laying down codes of social behaviour in great detail. These were meant to be followed by Brahmanas in particular and the rest of society in general. From *c.* 500 BCE, these norms were compiled in Sanskrit texts known as the Dharmasutras and Dharmashastras. The most important of such works, the *Manusmriti*, was compiled between *c.* 200 BCE and 200 CE.

While the Brahmana authors of these texts claimed that their point of view had universal validity and that what they prescribed had to be obeyed by everybody, it is likely that real social relations were more complicated. Besides, given the regional diversity within the subcontinent and the difficulties of communication, the influence of Brahmanas was by no means all-pervasive.

What is interesting is that the Dharmasutras and Dharmashastras recognised as many as eight forms of marriage. Of these, the first four were considered as "good" while the remaining were condemned. It is possible that these were practised by those who did not accept Brahmanical norms.

2.4 The *gotra* of women

One Brahmanical practice, evident from *c.* 1000 BCE onwards, was to classify people (especially Brahmanas) in terms of *gotras*. Each *gotra* was named after a Vedic seer, and all those who belonged to the same *gotra* were regarded as his descendants. Two rules about *gotra* were particularly important: women were expected to give up their father's *gotra* and adopt that of their husband on marriage and members of the same *gotra* could not marry.

One way to find out whether this was commonly followed is to consider the names of men and women, which were sometimes derived from *gotra* names. These names are available for powerful ruling lineages such as the Satavahanas who ruled over parts of western India and the Deccan (*c.* second century BCE-second century CE). Several of their inscriptions have been recovered, which allow historians to trace family ties, including marriages.

Source 4

Names of Satavahana kings from inscriptions

These are the names of several generations of Satavahana rulers, recovered from inscriptions. Note the uniform title *raja.* Also note the following word, which ends with the term *puta*, a Prakrit word meaning "son". The term Gotami-puta means "son of Gotami". Names like Gotami and Vasithi are feminine forms of Gotama and Vasistha, Vedic seers after whom *gotras* were named.

raja Gotami-puta Siri-Satakani

raja Vasithi-puta (sami-) Siri-Pulumayi

raja Gotami-puta sami-Siri-Yana-Satakani

raja Madhari-puta svami-Sakasena

raja Vasathi-puta Chatarapana-Satakani

raja Hariti-puta Vinhukada Chutukulanamda-Satakamni

raja Gotami-puta Siri-Vijaya- Satakani

➲ How many Gotami-putas and how many Vasithi (alternative spelling Vasathi)-putas are there?

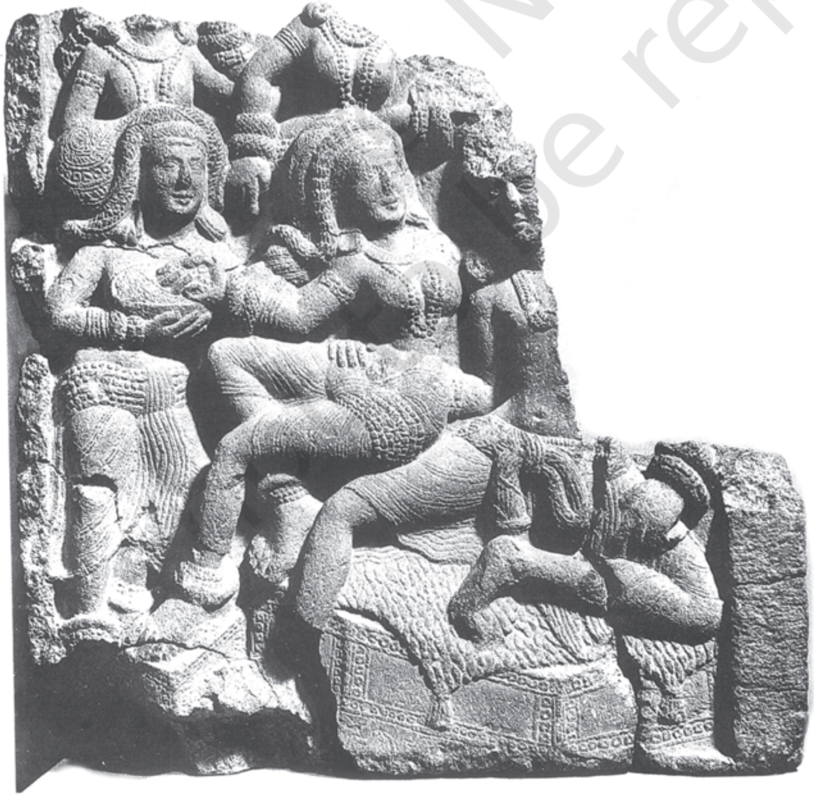


Fig. 3.3
A Satavahana ruler and his wife
This is one of the rare sculptural depictions of a ruler from the wall of a cave donated to Buddhist monks. This sculpture dates to *c.* second century BCE.

Metronymics in the Upanishads

The *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad,* one of the earliest Upanishads (see also Chapter 4), contains a list of successive generations of teachers and students, many of whom were designated by metronymics.

Source 5

A mother's advice

The *Mahabharata* describes how, when war between the Kauravas and the Pandavas became almost inevitable, Gandhari made one last appeal to her eldest son Duryodhana:

> By making peace you honour your father and me, as well as your well-wishers … it is the wise man in control of his senses who guards his kingdom. Greed and anger drag a man away from his profits; by defeating these two enemies a king conquers the earth … You will happily enjoy the earth, my son, along with the wise and heroic Pandavas … There is no good in a war, no law (*dharma*) and profit (*artha*), let alone happiness; nor is there (necessarily) victory in the end – don't set your mind on war …

Duryodhana did not listen to this advice and fought and lost the war.

➲ Does this passage give you an idea about the way in which mothers were viewed in early Indian societies?

➲ Discuss…

How are children named today? Are these ways of naming similar to or different from those described in this section?

Some of the Satavahana rulers were polygynous (that is, had more than one wife). An examination of the names of women who married Satavahana rulers indicates that many of them had names derived from *gotras* such as Gotama and Vasistha, their father's *gotras*. They evidently retained these names instead of adopting names derived from their husband's *gotra* name as they were required to do according to the Brahmanical rules. What is also apparent is that some of these women belonged to the same *gotra*. As is obvious, this ran counter to the ideal of exogamy recommended in the Brahmanical texts. In fact, it exemplified an alternative practice, that of endogamy or marriage within the kin group, which was (and is) prevalent amongst several communities in south India. Such marriages amongst kinfolk (such as cousins) ensured a close-knit community.

It is likely that there were variations in other parts of the subcontinent as well, but as yet it has not been possible to reconstruct specific details.

2.5 Were mothers important?

We have seen that Satavahana rulers were identified through metronymics (names derived from that of the mother). Although this may suggest that mothers were important, we need to be cautious before we arrive at any conclusion. In the case of the Satavahanas we know that succession to the throne was generally patrilineal.

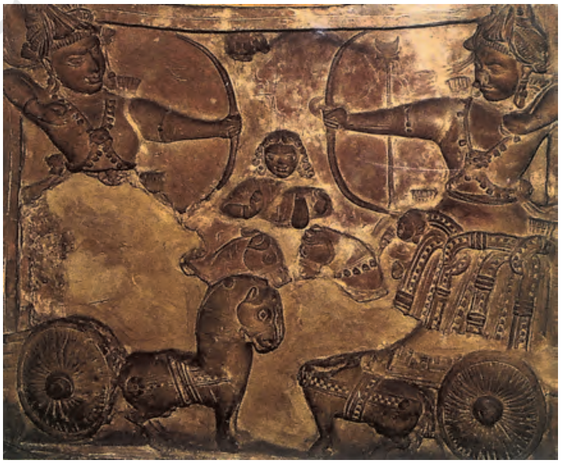


Fig. 3.4
A battle scene
This is amongst the earliest sculptural depictions of a scene from the *Mahabharata*, a terracotta sculpture from the walls of a temple in Ahichchhatra (Uttar Pradesh), *c.* fifth century CE.

3. SOCIAL DIFFERENCES: WITHIN AND BEYOND THE FRAMEWORK OF CASTE

You are probably familiar with the term caste, which refers to a set of hierarchically ordered social categories. The ideal order was laid down in the Dharmasutras and Dharmashastras. Brahmanas claimed that this order, in which they were ranked first, was divinely ordained, while placing groups classified as Shudras and "untouchables" at the very bottom of the social order. Positions within the order were supposedly determined by birth.

3.1 The "right" occupation

The Dharmasutras and Dharmashastras also contained rules about the ideal "occupations" of the four categories or *varnas.* Brahmanas were supposed to study and teach the Vedas, perform sacrifices and get sacrifices performed, and give and receive gifts. Kshatriyas were to engage in warfare, protect people and administer justice, study the Vedas, get sacrifices performed, and make gifts. The last three "occupations" were also assigned to the Vaishyas, who were in addition expected to engage in agriculture, pastoralism and trade. Shudras were assigned only one occupation – that of serving the three "higher" *varnas.*

The Brahmanas evolved two or three strategies for enforcing these norms. One, as we have just seen, was to assert that the *varna* order was of divine origin. Second, they advised kings to ensure that these norms were followed within their kingdoms. And third, they attempted to persuade people that their status was determined by birth. However, this was not always easy. So prescriptions were often reinforced by stories told in the *Mahabharata* and other texts.

Source 6

A divine order?

To justify their claims, Brahmanas often cited a verse from a hymn in the *Rigveda* known as the *Purusha sukta*, describing the sacrifice of *Purusha,* the primeval man. All the elements of the universe, including the four social categories, were supposed to have emanated from his body:

> The Brahmana was his mouth, of his arms was made the Kshatriya.
>
> His thighs became the Vaishya, of his feet the Shudra was born.

➲ Why do you think the Brahmanas quoted this verse frequently?

Source 7

"Proper" social roles

Here is a story from the *Adi Parvan* of the *Mahabharata:*

Once Drona, a Brahmana who taught archery to the Kuru princes, was approached by Ekalavya, a forest-dwelling *nishada* (a hunting community). When Drona, who knew the *dharma*, refused to have him as his pupil, Ekalavya returned to the forest, prepared an image of Drona out of clay, and treating it as his teacher, began to practise on his own. In due course, he acquired great skill in archery. One day, the Kuru princes went hunting and their dog, wandering in the woods, came upon Ekalavya. When the dog smelt the dark *nishada* wrapped in black deer skin, his body caked with dirt, it began to bark. Annoyed, Ekalavya shot seven arrows into its mouth. When the dog returned to the Pandavas, they were amazed at this superb display of archery. They tracked down Ekalavya, who introduced himself as a pupil of Drona.

Drona had once told his favourite student Arjuna, that he would be unrivalled amongst his pupils. Arjuna now reminded Drona about this. Drona approached Ekalavya, who immediately acknowledged and honoured him as his teacher. When Drona demanded his right thumb as his fee, Ekalavya unhesitatingly cut it off and offered it. But thereafter, when he shot with his remaining fingers, he was no longer as fast as he had been before. Thus, Drona kept his word: no one was better than Arjuna.

➲ What message do you think this story was meant to convey to the *nishadas?*
What message would it convey to Kshatriyas?
Do you think that Drona, as a Brahmana, was acting according to the Dharmasutras when he was teaching archery?

3.2 Non-Kshatriya kings

According to the Shastras, only Kshatriyas could be kings. However, several important ruling lineages probably had different origins. The social background of the Mauryas, who ruled over a large empire, has been hotly debated. While later Buddhist texts suggested they were Kshatriyas, Brahmanical texts described them as being of "low" origin. The Shungas and Kanvas, the immediate successors of the Mauryas, were Brahmanas. In fact, political power was effectively open to anyone who could muster support and resources, and rarely depended on birth as a Kshatriya.

Other rulers, such as the Shakas who came from Central Asia, were regarded as *mlechchhas*, barbarians or outsiders by the Brahmanas. However, one of the earliest inscriptions in Sanskrit describes how Rudradaman, the best-known Shaka ruler (*c.* second century CE), rebuilt Sudarshana lake (Chapter 2). This suggests that powerful *mlechchhas* were familiar with Sanskritic traditions.

It is also interesting that the best-known ruler of the Satavahana dynasty, Gotami-puta Siri-Satakani, claimed to be both a unique Brahmana (*eka bamhana)* and a destroyer of the pride of Kshatriyas. He also claimed to have ensured that there was no intermarriage amongst members of the four *varnas.* At the same time, he entered into a marriage alliance with the kin of Rudradaman.

As you can see from this example, integration within the framework of caste was often a complicated process. The Satavahanas claimed to be Brahmanas, whereas according to the Brahmanas, kings ought to have been Kshatriyas. They claimed to uphold the fourfold *varna* order, but entered into marriage alliances with people who were supposed to be excluded from the system. And, as we have seen, they practised endogamy instead of the exogamous system recommended in the Brahmanical texts.

3.3 *Jatis* and social mobility

These complexities are reflected in another term used in texts to refer to social categories – *jati.* In Brahmanical theory, *jati,* like *varna,* was based on birth. However, while the number of *varnas* was fixed at four, there was no restriction on the number of *jatis.* In fact, whenever Brahmanical authorities encountered new groups – for instance, people living in forests such as the *nishadas* – or wanted to assign a name to occupational categories such as the goldsmith or *suvarnakara,* which did not easily fit into the fourfold *varna* system, they classified them as a *jati.* *Jatis* which shared a common occupation or profession were sometimes organised into *shrenis* or guilds.

We seldom come across documents that record the histories of these groups. But there are exceptions. One interesting stone inscription (*c.* fifth century CE), found in Mandasor (Madhya Pradesh), records the history of a guild of silk weavers who originally lived in Lata (Gujarat), from where they

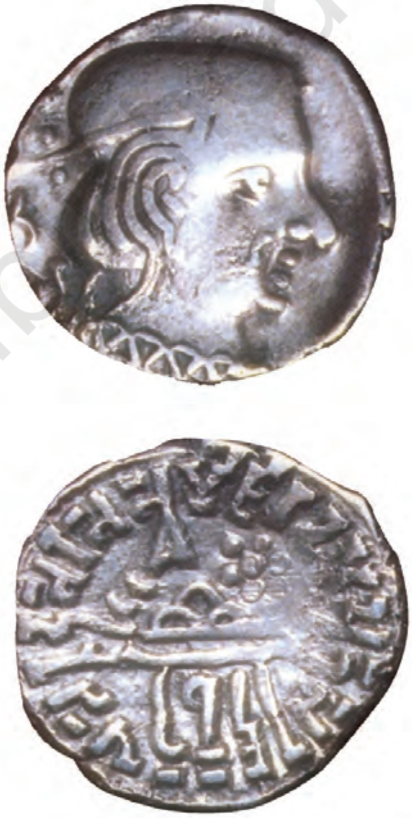


Fig. 3.5
Silver coin depicting a Shaka ruler,
c. fourth century CE

migrated to Mandasor, then known as Dashapura. It states that they undertook the difficult journey along with their children and kinfolk, as they had heard about the greatness of the local king, and wanted to settle in his kingdom.

The inscription provides a fascinating glimpse of complex social processes and provides insights into the nature of guilds or *shrenis*. Although membership was based on a shared craft specialisation, some members adopted other occupations. It also indicates that the members shared more than a common profession – they collectively decided to invest their wealth, earned through their craft, to construct a splendid temple in honour of the sun god.

The case of the merchants

Sanskrit texts and inscriptions used the term *vanik* to designate merchants. While trade was defined as an occupation for Vaishyas in the Shastras, a more complex situation is evident in plays such as the *Mrichchhakatika* written by Shudraka (*c.* fourth century CE), Here, the hero Charudatta was described as both a Brahmana and a *sarthavaha* or merchant And a fifth-century inscription describes two brothers who made a donation for the construction of a temple as *kshatriya-vaniks*.

Source 8

What the silk weavers did

Here is an excerpt from the inscription, which is in Sanskrit:

> Some are intensely attached to music (so) pleasing to the ear; others, being proud of (the authorship of) a hundred excellent biographies, are conversant with wonderful tales; (others), filled with humility, are absorbed in excellent religious discourses; … some excel in their own religious rites; likewise by others, who were self-possessed, the science of (Vedic) astronomy was mastered; and others, valorous in battle, even today forcibly cause harm to the enemies.

➲ Do you think the silk weavers were following the occupation laid down for them in the Shastras?

3.4 Beyond the four *varnas*: Integration

Given the diversity of the subcontinent, there were, and always have been, populations whose social practices were not influenced by Brahmanical ideas. When they figure in Sanskrit texts, they are often described as odd, uncivilised, or even animal-like. In some instances, these included forest-dwellers – for whom hunting and gathering remained an important means of subsistence. Categories such as the *nishada,* to which Ekalavya is supposed to have belonged, are examples of this.

Others who were viewed with suspicion included populations such as nomadic pastoralists, who could not be easily accommodated within the framework of settled agriculturists. Sometimes those who spoke non-Sanskritic languages were labelled as *mlechchhas* and looked down upon. There was nonetheless also a sharing of ideas and beliefs between these people. The nature of relations is evident in some stories in the *Mahabharata.*

Source 9

A tiger-like husband

This is a summary of a story from the *Adi Parvan* of the *Mahabharata:*

> The Pandavas had fled into the forest. They were tired and fell asleep; only Bhima, the second Pandava, renowned for his prowess, was keeping watch. A man-eating *rakshasa* caught the scent of the Pandavas and sent his sister Hidimba to capture them. She fell in love with Bhima, transformed herself into a lovely maiden and proposed to him. He refused. Meanwhile, the *rakshasa* arrived and challenged Bhima to a wrestling match. Bhima accepted the challenge and killed him. The others woke up hearing the noise. Hidimba introduced herself, and declared her love for Bhima. She told Kunti: "I have forsaken my friends, my *dharma* and my kin; and good lady, chosen your tiger-like son for my man … whether you think me a fool, or your devoted servant, let me join you, great lady, with your son as my husband."
>
> Ultimately, Yudhisthira agreed to the marriage on condition that they would spend the day together but that Bhima would return every night. The couple roamed all over the world during the day. In due course Hidimba gave birth to a *rakshasa* boy named Ghatotkacha. Then the mother and son left the Pandavas. Ghatotkacha promised to return to the Pandavas whenever they needed him.

Some historians suggest that the term *rakshasa* is used to describe people whose practices differed from those laid down in Brahmanical texts.

➲ Identify the practices described in this passage which seem non-Brahmanical.

3.5 Beyond the four *varnas*

Subordination and conflict

While the Brahmanas considered some people as being outside the system, they also developed a sharper social divide by classifying certain social categories as "untouchable". This rested on a notion that certain activities, especially those connected with the performance of rituals, were sacred and by

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extension “pure”. Those who considered themselves pure avoided taking food from those they designated as “untouchable”. In sharp contrast to the purity aspect, some activities were regarded as particularly “polluting”. These included handling corpses and dead animals. Those who performed such tasks, designated as *chandalas,* were placed at the very bottom of the hierarchy. Their touch and, in some cases, even seeing them was regarded as “polluting” by those who claimed to be at the top of the social order.

The *Manusmriti* laid down the “duties” of the *chandalas.* They had to live outside the village, use discarded utensils, and wear clothes of the dead and ornaments of iron. They could not walk about in villages and cities at night. They had to dispose of the bodies of those who had no relatives and serve as executioners. Much later, the Chinese Buddhist monk Fa Xian (*c.* fifth century CE) wrote that “untouchables” had to sound a clapper in the streets so that people could avoid seeing them. Another Chinese pilgrim, Xuan Zang (*c.* seventh century), observed that executioners and scavengers were forced to live outside the city.

By examining non-Brahmanical texts which depict the lives of *chandalas*, historians have tried to find out whether *chandalas* accepted the life of degradation prescribed in the Shastras. Sometimes, these depictions correspond with those in the Brahmanical texts. But occasionally, there are hints of different social realities.

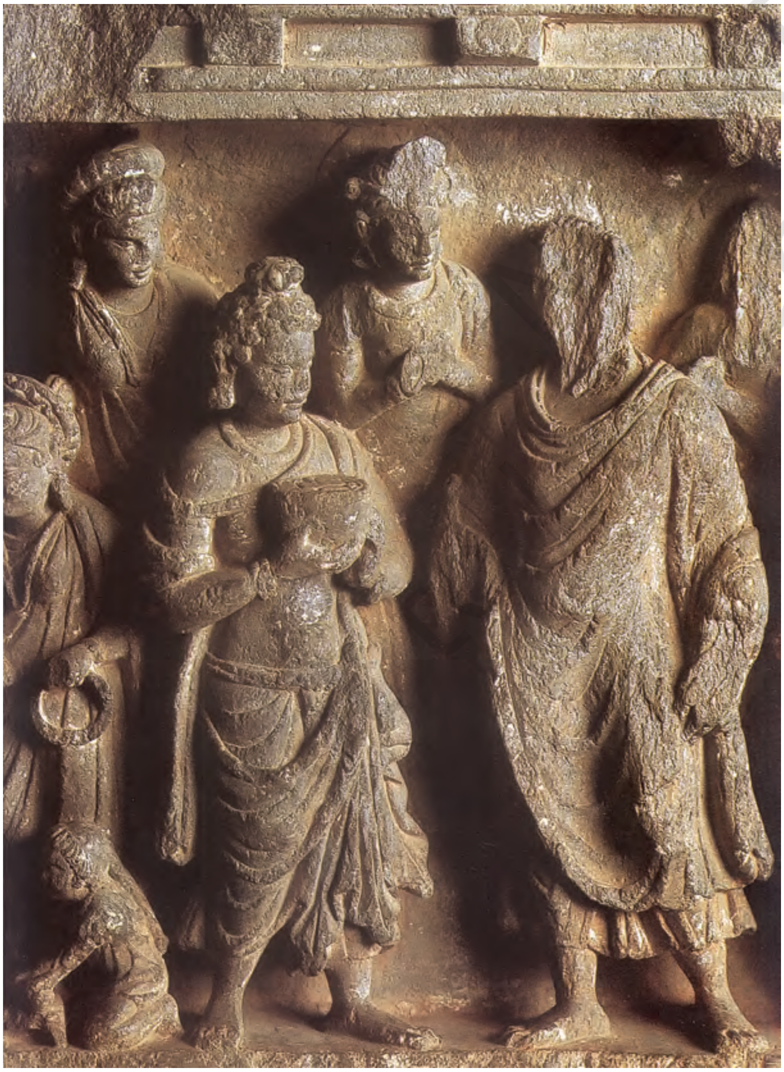

Fig. 3.6
Depiction of a mendicant seeking alms, stone sculpture (Gandhara)
c. *third century,* CE

Source 10

A Story of Bodhisattva from the Matanga Jataka

Did *chandalas* resist the attempts to push them to the bottom of the social order? Read this story, which is part of the *Matanga Jataka*, a Pali text, where the Bodhisattva (the Buddha in a previous birth) is identified as a *chandala.*

> Once, the Bodhisattva was born outside the city of Banaras as a *chandala's* son and named Matanga. One day, when he had gone to the city on some work, he encountered Dittha Mangalika, the daughter of a merchant. When she saw him, she exclaimed "I have seen something inauspicious" and washed her eyes. The angry hangers-on then beat him up. In protest, he went and lay down at the door of her father's house. On the seventh day they brought out the girl and gave her to him. She carried the starving Matanga back to the *chandala* settlement. Once he returned home, he decided to renounce the world. After attaining spiritual powers, he returned to Banaras and married her. A son named Mandavya Kumara was born to them. He learnt the three Vedas as he grew up and began to provide food to 16,000 Brahmanas every day.
>
> One day, Matanga, dressed in rags, with a clay alms bowl in his hand, arrived at his son's doorstep and begged for food. Mandavya replied that he looked like an outcaste and was unworthy of alms; the food was meant for the Brahmanas. Matanga said: "Those who are proud of their birth and are ignorant do not deserve gifts. On the contrary, those who are free from vices are worthy of offerings." Mandavya lost his temper and asked his servants to throw the man out. Matanga rose in the air and disappeared. When Dittha Mangalika learnt about the incident, she followed Matanga and begged his forgiveness. He asked her to take a bit of the leftover from his bowl and give it to Mandavya and the Brahmanas …

➲ Identify elements in the story that suggest that it was written from the perspective of Matanga.

➲ Discuss...

Which of the sources mentioned in this section suggest that people followed the occupations laid down by Brahmanas? Which sources suggest other possibilities?

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4. BEYOND BIRTH

RESOURCES AND STATUS

If you recall the economic relations discussed in Chapter 2, you will realise that slaves, landless agricultural labourers, hunters, fisherfolk, pastoralists, peasants, village headmen, craftspersons, merchants and kings emerged as social actors in different parts of the subcontinent. Their social positions were often shaped by their access to economic resources. Here we will examine the social implications of access to resources in certain specific situations.

4.1 Gendered access to property

Consider first a critical episode in the *Mahabharata.* During the course of the long-drawn rivalry between the Kauravas and the Pandavas, Duryodhana invited Yudhisthira to a game of dice. The latter, who was deceived by his rival, staked his gold, elephants, chariots, slaves, army, treasury, kingdom, the property of his subjects, his brothers and finally himself and lost all. Then he staked their common wife Draupadi and lost her too.

Issues of ownership, foregrounded in stories such as this one (Source 11), also figure in the Dharmasutras and Dharmashastras. According to the *Manusmriti,* the paternal estate was to be divided equally amongst sons after the death of the parents, with a special share for the eldest. Women could not claim a share of these resources.

However, women were allowed to retain the gifts they received on the occasion of their marriage as *stridhana* (literally, a woman's wealth). This could be inherited by their children, without the husband having any claim on it. At the same time, the *Manusmriti* warned women against hoarding family property, or even their own valuables, without the husband's permission.

You have read about wealthy women such as the Vakataka queen Prabhavati Gupta (Chapter 2). However, cumulative evidence – both epigraphic and textual – suggests that while upper-class women may have had access to resources, land, cattle and money were generally controlled by men. In other words, social differences between men and women were sharpened because of the differences in access to resources.

Source 11

Draupadi's question

Draupadi is supposed to have asked Yudhisthira whether he had lost himself before staking her. Two contrary opinions were expressed in response to this question.

One, that even if Yudhisthira had lost himself earlier, his wife remained under his control, so he could stake her.

Two, that an unfree man (as Yudhisthira was when he had lost himself) could not stake another person.

The matter remained unresolved; ultimately, Dhritarashtra restored to the Pandavas and Draupadi their personal freedom.

➲ Do you think that this episode suggests that wives could be treated as the property of their husbands?

Source 12

How could men and women acquire wealth?

For men, the *Manusmriti* declares, there are seven means of acquiring wealth: inheritance, finding, purchase, conquest, investment, work, and acceptance of gifts from good people.

For women, there are six means of acquiring wealth: what was given in front of the fire (marriage) or the bridal procession, or as a token of affection, and what she got from her brother, mother or father. She could also acquire wealth through any subsequent gift and whatever her "affectionate" husband might give her.

➲ Compare and contrast the ways in which men and women could acquire wealth.

4.2 *Varna* and access to property

According to the Brahmanical texts, another criterion (apart from gender) for regulating access to wealth was *varna*. As we saw earlier, the only "occupation" prescribed for Shudras was servitude, while a variety of occupations were listed for men of the first three *varnas*. If these provisions were actually implemented, the wealthiest men would have been the Brahmanas and the Kshatriyas. That this corresponded to some extent with social realities is evident from descriptions of priests and kings in other textual traditions. Kings are almost invariably depicted as wealthy; priests are also generally shown to be rich, though there are occasional depictions of the poor Brahmana.

At another level, even as the Brahmanical view of society was codified in the Dharmasutras and Dharmashastras, other traditions developed critiques of the *varna* order. Some of the best-known of these were developed within early Buddhism (*c.* sixth century BCE onwards; see also Chapter 4). The Buddhists recognised that there were differences in society, but did not regard these as natural or inflexible. They also rejected the idea of claims to status on the basis of birth.

Source 13

The wealthy Shudra

This story, based on a Buddhist text in Pali known as the *Majjhima Nikaya,* is part of a dialogue between a king named Avantiputta and a disciple of the Buddha named Kachchana. While it may not be literally true, it reveals Buddhist attitudes towards *varna.*

> Avantiputta asked Kachchana what he thought about Brahmanas who held that they were the best caste and that all other castes were low; that Brahmanas were a fair caste while all other castes were dark; that only Brahmanas were pure, not non-Brahmanas; that Brahmanas were sons of Brahma, born of his mouth, born of Brahma, formed by Brahma, heirs to Brahma.
>
> Kachchana replied: "What if a Shudra were wealthy … would another Shudra …or a Kshatriya or a Brahmana or a Vaishya … speak politely to him?"
>
> Avantiputta replied that if a Shudra had wealth or corn or gold or silver, he could have as his obedient servant another Shudra to get up earlier than he, to go to rest later, to carry out his orders, to speak politely; or he could even have a Kshatriya or a Brahmana or a Vaishya as his obedient servant.
>
> Kachchana asked: "This being so, are not these four *varnas* exactly the same?"
>
> Avantiputta conceded that there was no difference amongst the *varnas* on this count.

➲ Read Avantiputta's first statement again. What are the ideas in it that are derived from Brahmanical texts/traditions? Can you identify the source of any of these?
What, according to this text, explains social difference?

4.3 An alternative social scenario: Sharing wealth

So far we have been examining situations where people either claimed or were assigned status on the basis of their wealth. However, there were other possibilities as well; situations where men who were generous were respected, while those who were miserly or simply accumulated wealth for themselves were despised. One area where these values were cherished was ancient Tamilakam, where, as we saw earlier (Chapter 2), there were several chiefdoms around 2,000 years ago. Amongst other things, the chiefs were patrons of bards and poets who sang their praise. Poems included in the Tamil Sangam anthologies often illuminate social and economic relationships, suggesting that while there were differences between rich and poor, those who controlled resources were also expected to share them.

Source 14

The poor generous chief

In this composition from the *Puranaruru*, one of the anthologies of poems of the Tamil Sangam literature (*c.* first century CE), a bard describes his patron to other poets thus :

> He (i.e. the patron) doesn't have the wealth to lavish on others everyday
>
> Nor does he have the pettiness to say that he has nothing and so refuse!
>
> …
>
> he lives in Irantai (a place) and is generous. He is an enemy to the hunger of bards!
>
> If you wish to cure your poverty, come along with me, bards whose lips are so skilled!
>
> If we request him, showing him our ribs thin with hunger, he will go to the blacksmith of his village
>
> And will say to that man of powerful hands:
>
> "Shape me a long spear for war, one that has a straight blade!"

➲ What are the strategies which the bard uses to try and persuade the chief to be generous?
What is the chief expected to do to acquire wealth in order to give some to the bards?

➲ Discuss...

How do social relationships operate in present-day societies? Are there any similarities or differences with patterns of the past?

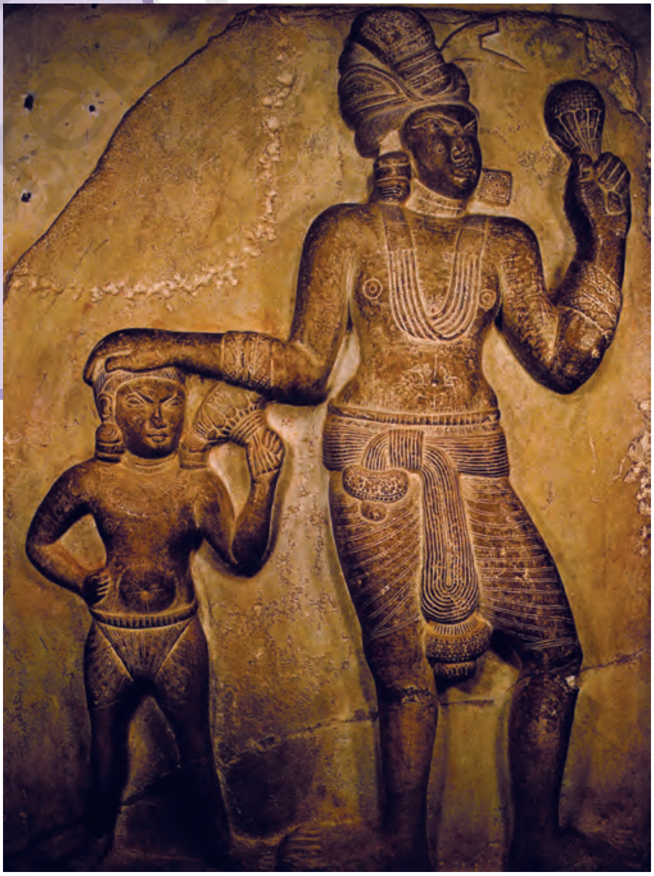


Fig. 3.7
A chief and his follower, stone sculpture, Amaravati (Andhra Pradesh), c. second century CE

➲ How has the sculptor shown the difference between the chief and his follower?

5. EXPLAINING SOCIAL DIFFERENCES: A SOCIAL CONTRACT

The Buddhists also developed an alternative understanding of social inequalities, and of the institutions required to regulate social conflict. In a myth found in a text known as the *Sutta Pitaka* they suggested that originally human beings did not have fully evolved bodily forms, nor was the world of plants fully developed. All beings lived in an idyllic state of peace, taking from nature only what they needed for each meal.

However, there was a gradual deterioration of this state as human beings became increasingly greedy, vindictive and deceitful. This led them to wonder: "What if we were to select a certain being who should be wrathful when indignation is right, who should censure that which should rightly be censured and should banish him who deserves to be banished? We will give him in return a proportion of the rice … chosen by the whole people, he will be known as *mahasammata,* the great elect."

This suggests that the institution of kingship was based on human choice, with taxes as a form of payment for services rendered by the king. At the same time, it reveals recognition of human agency in creating and institutionalising economic and social relations. There are other implications as well. For instance, if human beings were responsible for the creation of the system, they could also change it in future.

6. HANDLING TEXTS

HISTORIANS AND THE *MAHABHARATA*

If you look through the sources cited in this chapter once more you will notice that historians consider several elements when they analyse texts. They examine whether texts were written in Prakrit, Pali or Tamil, *languages* that were probably used by ordinary people, or in Sanskrit, a language meant almost exclusively for priests and elites. They also consider the *kinds* of text. Were these mantras, learnt and chanted by ritual specialists, or stories that people could have read, or heard, and then retold if they found them interesting? Besides, they try to find out about the *author(s)* whose perspectives and ideas shaped the text, as well as the intended *audience*, as, very often, authors keep the interests of their audience in mind while composing their work. And they try and ascertain the possible *date* of the composition or compilation of the texts as well as the *place* where they may have been composed. It is only after making these assessments that they draw on the *content* of texts to arrive at an understanding of their historical significance. As you can imagine, this is a particularly difficult task for a text as complex as the *Mahabharata.*

6.1 Language and content

Let us look at the language of the text. The version of the *Mahabharata* we have been considering is in Sanskrit (although there are versions in other languages as well). However, the Sanskrit used in the *Mahabharata* is far simpler than that of the Vedas, or of the *prashastis* discussed in Chapter 2. As such, it was probably widely understood.

Historians usually classify the contents of the present text under two broad heads – sections that contain stories, designated as the *narrative*, and sections that contain prescriptions about social norms, designated as *didactic.* This division is by no means watertight – the didactic sections include stories, and the narrative often contains a social message. However, generally historians agree that the *Mahabharata* was meant to be a dramatic, moving story, and that the didactic portions were probably added later.

Didactic refers to something that is meant for purposes of instruction.

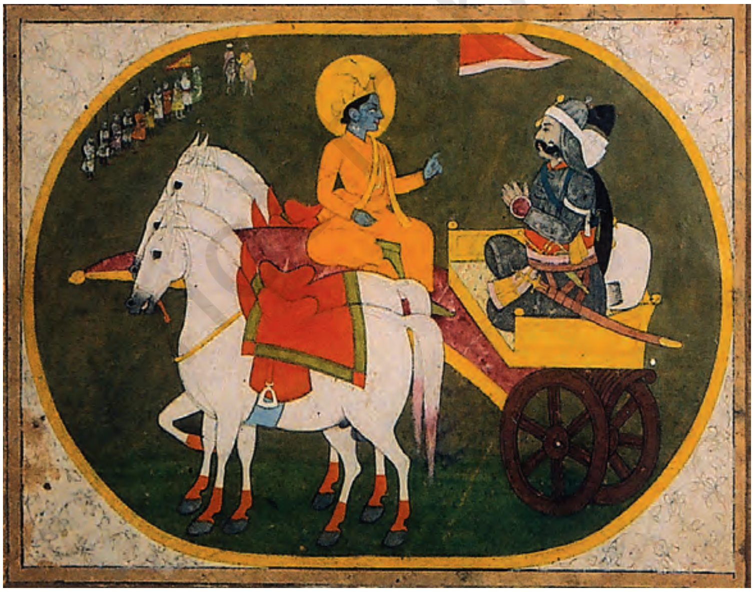


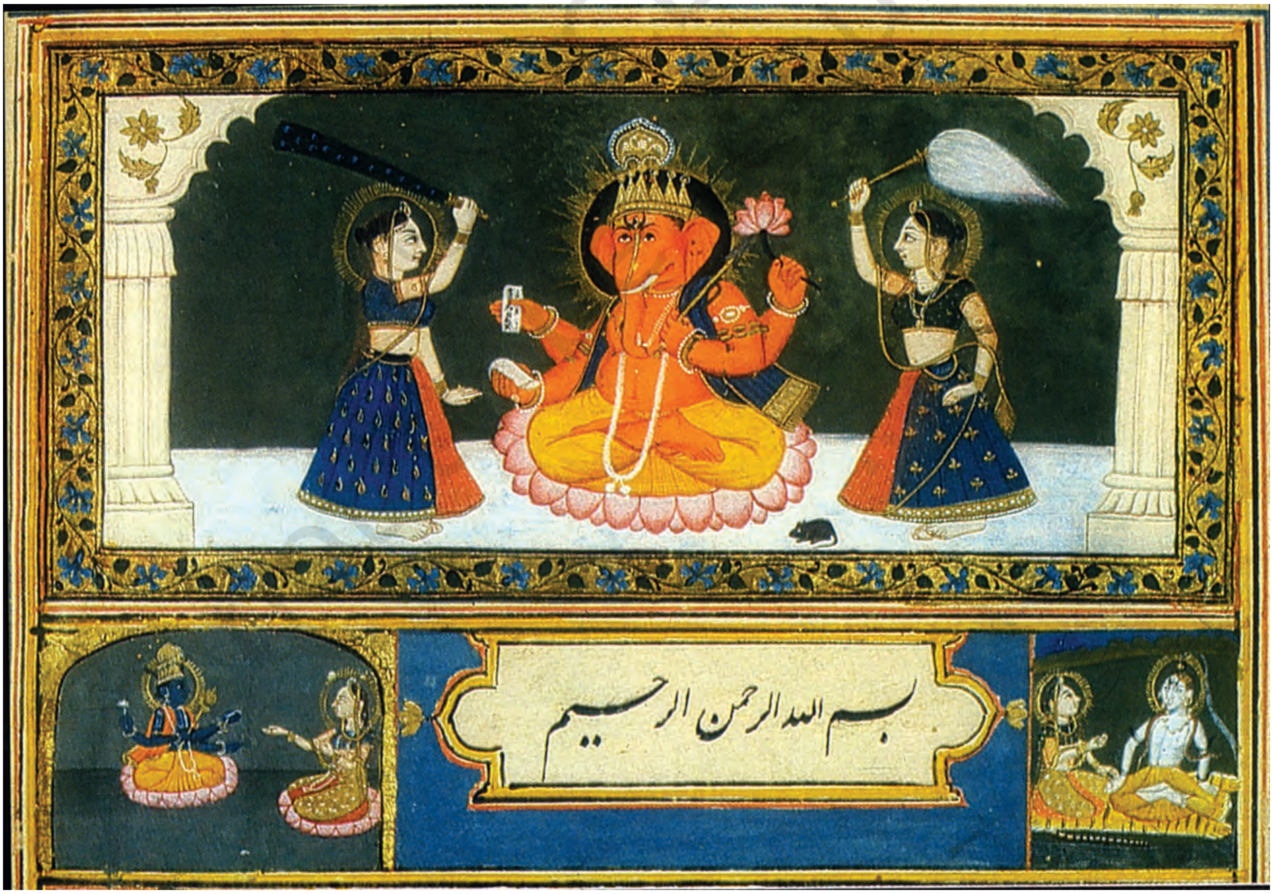
Fig. 3.8
Krishna advises Arjuna on the battlefield
This painting dates to the eighteenth century. Perhaps the most important didactic section of the *Mahabharata* is the *Bhagavad Gita*, which contains the advice offered by Lord Krishna to Arjuna. This scene is frequently depicted in painting and sculpture.

Interestingly, the text is described as an *itihasa* within early Sanskrit tradition. The literal meaning of the term is “thus it was”, which is why it is generally translated as “history”. Was there a real war that was remembered in the epic? We are not sure. Some historians think that the memory of an actual conflict amongst kinfolk was preserved in the narrative; others point out that there is no other corroborative evidence of the battle.

6.2 Author(s) and dates

Who wrote the text? This is a question to which there are several answers. The original story was probably composed by charioteer-bards known as *sutas* who generally accompanied Kshatriya warriors to the battlefield and composed poems celebrating their victories and other achievements. These compositions circulated orally. Then, from the fifth century BCE, Brahmanas took over the story and began to commit it to writing. This was the time when chiefdoms such as those of the Kurus and

Fig. 3.9
Lord Ganesha the scribe
According to tradition, Vyasa dictated the text to the deity. This illustration is from a Persian translation of the *Mahabharata*, *c.* 1740-50.



Panchalas, around whom the story of the epic revolves, were gradually becoming kingdoms. Did the new kings want their *itihasa* to be recorded and preserved more systematically? It is also possible that the upheavals that often accompanied the establishment of these states, where old social values were often replaced by new norms, are reflected in some parts of the story.

We notice another phase in the composition of the text between *c.* 200 BCE and 200 CE. This was the period when the worship of Vishnu was growing in importance, and Krishna, one of the important figures of the epic, was coming to be identified with Vishnu. Subsequently, between *c.* 200 and 400 CE, large didactic sections resembling the *Manusmriti* were added. With these additions, a text which initially perhaps had less than 10,000 verses grew to comprise about 100,000 verses. This enormous composition is traditionally attributed to a sage named Vyasa.

6.3 The search for convergence

The *Mahabharata*, like any major epic, contains vivid descriptions of battles, forests, palaces and settlements. In 1951-52, the archaeologist B.B. Lal excavated at a village named Hastinapura in Meerut (Uttar Pradesh). Was this the Hastinapura of the epic? While the similarity in names could be coincidental, the location of the site in the Upper Ganga doab, where the Kuru kingdom was situated, suggests that it may have been the capital of the Kurus mentioned in the text.

Lal found evidence of five occupational levels, of which the second and third are of interest to us. This is what Lal noted about the houses in the second phase (*c.* twelfth-seventh centuries BCE): "Within the limited area excavated, no definite plans of houses were obtained, but walls of mud and mud-bricks were duly encountered. The discovery of mud-plaster with prominent reed-marks suggested that some of the houses had reed walls plastered over with mud." For the third phase (*c.* sixth-third centuries BCE), he noted: "Houses of this period were built of mud-brick as well as burnt bricks. Soakage jars and brick drains were used for draining out refuse water, while terracotta ring-wells may have been used both as wells and drainage pits."

Source 15

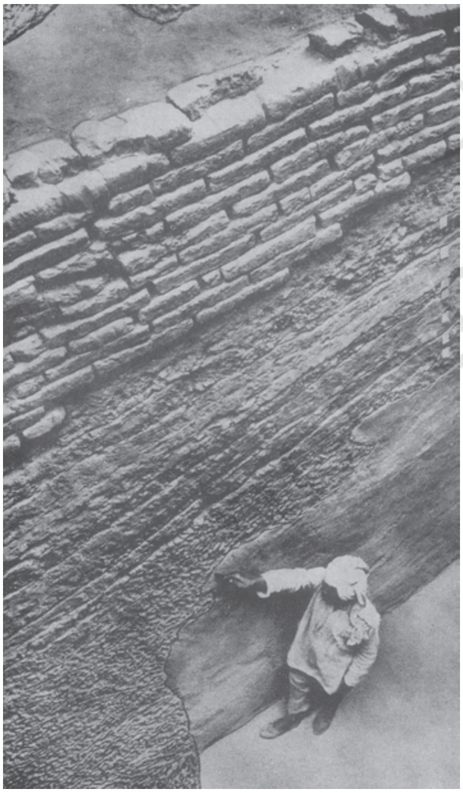
Hastinapura

This is how the city is described in the *Adi Parvan* of the *Mahabharata:*

> The city, bursting like the ocean, packed with hundreds of mansions, displayed with its gateways, arches and turrets like massing clouds the splendour of Great Indra's city.

➲ Do you think Lal's finds match the description of Hastinapura in the epic?

Fig. 3.10
A wall excavated at Hastinapura



Was the description of the city in the epic added after the main narrative had been composed, when (after the sixth century BCE) urban centres flourished in the region? Or was it a flight of poetic fancy, which cannot always be verified by comparisons with other kinds of evidence?

Consider another instance. One of the most challenging episodes in the *Mahabharata* is Draupadi's marriage with the Pandavas, an instance of polyandry that is central to the narrative. If we examine the section of the epic that describes this event, it is evident that the author(s) attempted to explain it in a variety of ways.

Source 16

Draupadi's marriage

Drupada, the king of Panchala, organised a competition where the challenge was to string a bow and hit a target; the winner would be chosen to marry his daughter Draupadi. Arjuna was victorious and was garlanded by Draupadi. The Pandavas returned with her to their mother Kunti, who, even before she saw them, asked them to share whatever they had got. She realised her mistake when she saw Draupadi, but her command could not be violated. After much deliberation, Yudhisthira decided that Draupadi would be their common wife.

When Drupada was told about this, he protested. However, the seer Vyasa arrived and told him that the Pandavas were in reality incarnations of Indra, whose wife had been reborn as Draupadi, and they were thus destined for each other.

Vyasa added that in another instance a young woman had prayed to Shiva for a husband, and in her enthusiasm, had prayed five times instead of once. This woman was now reborn as Draupadi, and Shiva had fulfilled her prayers. Convinced by these stories, Drupada consented to the marriage.

➲ Why do you think the author(s) offered three explanations for a single episode?

Present-day historians suggest that the fact that the author(s) describe a polyandrous union indicates that polyandry may have been prevalent amongst ruling elites at some point of time. At the same time, the fact that so many different explanations are offered for the episode (Source 16) suggests that polyandry gradually fell into disfavour amongst the Brahmanas, who reworked and developed the text through the centuries.

Some historians note that while the practice of polyandry may have seemed unusual or even undesirable from the Brahmanical point of view, it was (and is) prevalent in the Himalayan region. Others suggest that there may have been a shortage of women during times of warfare, and this led to polyandry. In other words, it was attributed to a situation of crisis.

Some early sources suggest that polyandry was not the only or even the most prevalent form of marriage. Why then did the author(s) choose to associate this practice with the central characters of the *Mahabharata*? We need to remember that creative literature often has its own narrative requirements and does not always literally reflect social realities.

7. A DYNAMIC TEXT

The growth of the *Mahabharata* did not stop with the Sanskrit version. Over the centuries, versions of the epic were written in a variety of languages through an ongoing process of dialogue between peoples, communities, and those who wrote the texts. Several stories that originated in specific regions or circulated amongst certain people found their way into the epic. At the same time, the central story of the epic was often retold in different ways. And episodes were depicted in sculpture and painting. They also provided themes for a wide range of performing arts – plays, dance and other kinds of narrations.

➲ **Discuss...**

Read the excerpts from the *Mahabharata* included in this chapter once more. For each of these, discuss whether they could have been literally true. What do these excerpts tell us about those who composed the text? What do they tell us about those who must have read or heard the epic?

Most retellings or re-enactments of the epic draw on the main narrative in creative ways. Let us look at one example, an episode from the *Mahabharata* that has been transformed by Mahashweta Devi, a contemporary Bengali writer known for raising her voice against all forms of exploitation and oppression. In this particular instance, she works out alternative possibilities from the main story of the *Mahabharata* and draws attention to questions on which the Sanskrit text is silent.

The Sanskrit text describes how Duryodhana plotted to kill the Pandavas by inviting them to stay in a specially prepared house of lac, which he planned to set on fire. Forewarned, the Pandavas dug a tunnel to ensure their escape. Then Kunti arranged for a feast. While most of the invitees were Brahmanas, a *nishada* woman came with her five sons. When they were satiated with drink and fell off to sleep, the Pandavas escaped, setting fire to the house. When the bodies of the woman and her sons were discovered, people thought that the Pandavas were dead.

In her short story titled "Kunti O Nishadi", Mahashweta Devi takes up the narrative from where the *Mahabharata* ends it. She sets the story in a forest, where Kunti retires after the war. Kunti now has time to reflect on her past, and often confesses to what she regards as her failings, talking with the earth, the symbol of nature. Every day she sees the *nishadas* who come to collect wood, honey, tubers and roots. One *nishadi* (a *nishada* woman) often listens to Kunti when she talks with the earth.

One day, there was something in the air; the animals were fleeing the forest. Kunti noticed that the *nishadi* was watching her, and was startled when she spoke to her and asked if she remembered the house of lac. Yes, Kunti said, she did. Did she remember a certain elderly *nishadi* and her five young sons? And that she had served them wine till they were senseless, while she escaped with her own sons? That *nishadi* … "Not you!" Kunti exclaimed. The *nishadi* replied that the woman who was killed had been her mother-in-law. She added that while Kunti had been reflecting on her past, not once did she remember the six innocent lives that were lost because she had wanted to save herself and her sons. As they spoke, the flames drew nearer. The *nishadi* escaped to safety, but Kunti remained where she was.

TIMELINE 1
MAJOR TEXTUAL TRADITIONS

c. 500 BCE	*Ashtadhyayi* of Panini, a work on Sanskrit grammar
c. 500-200 BCE	Major Dharmasutras (in Sanskrit)
c. 500-100 BCE	Early Buddhist texts including the *Tripitaka* (in Pali)
c. 500 BCE-400 CE	*Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* (in Sanskrit)
c. 200 BCE-200 CE	*Manusmriti* (in Sanskrit); composition and compilation of Tamil Sangam literature
c. 100 CE	*Charaka* and *Sushruta Samhitas*, works on medicine (in Sanskrit)
c. 200 CE onwards	Compilation of the *Puranas* (in Sanskrit)
c. 300 CE	*Natyashastra* of Bharata, a work on dramaturgy (in Sanskrit)
c. 300-600 CE	Other Dharmashastras (in Sanskrit)
c. 400-500 CE	Sanskrit plays including the works of Kalidasa; works on astronomy and mathematics by Aryabhata and Varahamihira (in Sanskrit); compilation of Jaina works (in Prakrit)

TIMELINE 2
MAJOR LANDMARKS IN THE STUDY OF THE *MAHABHARATA*

Twentieth century

1919-66	Preparation and publication of the Critical Edition of the *Mahabharata*
1973	J.A.B. van Buitenen begins English translation of the Critical Edition; remains incomplete after his death in 1978

ANSWER IN 100-150 WORDS

1. Explain why patriliny may have been particularly important among elite families.
2. Discuss whether kings in early states were invariably Kshatriyas.
3. Compare and contrast the *dharma* or norms mentioned in the stories of Drona, Hidimba and Matanga.
4. In what ways was the Buddhist theory of a social contract different from the Brahmanical view of society derived from the *Purusha sukta?*
5. The following is an excerpt from the *Mahabharata,* in which Yudhisthira, the eldest Pandava, speaks to Sanjaya, a messenger:

> Sanjaya, convey my respectful greetings to all the Brahmanas and the chief priest of the house of Dhritarashtra. I bow respectfully to teacher Drona … I hold the feet of our preceptor Kripa … (and) the chief of the Kurus, the great Bhishma. I bow respectfully to the old king (Dhritarashtra). I greet and ask after the health of his son Duryodhana and his younger brother … Also greet all the young Kuru warriors who are our brothers, sons and grandsons … Greet above all him, who is to us like father and mother, the wise Vidura (born of a slave woman) … I bow to the elderly ladies who are known as our mothers. To those who are our wives you say this, "I hope they are well-protected"… Our daughters-in-law born of good families and mothers of children greet on my behalf. Embrace for me those who are our daughters … The beautiful, fragrant, well-dressed courtesans of ours you should also greet. Greet the slave women and their children, greet the aged, the maimed (and) the helpless …

Try and identify the criteria used to make this list – in terms of age, gender, kinship ties. Are there any other criteria? For each category, explain why they are placed in a particular position in the list.

Write a short essay (about 500 words) on the following:

6. This is what a famous historian of Indian literature, Maurice Winternitz, wrote about the *Mahabharata:* "just because the Mahabharata represents more of an entire literature … and contains so much and so many kinds of things, … (it) gives(s) us an insight into the most profound depths of the soul of the Indian folk." Discuss.

7. Discuss whether the *Mahabharata* could have been the work of a single author.

8. How important were gender differences in early societies? Give reasons for your answer.

9. Discuss the evidence that suggests that Brahmanical prescriptions about kinship and marriage were not universally followed.

Map work

10. Compare the map in this chapter with Map 1 in Chapter 2. List the *mahajanapadas* and cities located near the Kuru-Panchala lands.

Project (any one)

11. Find out about retellings of the *Mahabharata* in other languages. Discuss how they handle any two of the episodes of the text described in this chapter, explaining any similarities or differences that you notice.

12. Imagine that you are an author and rewrite the story of Ekalavya from a perspective of your choice.

If you would like to know more, read:

Uma Chakravarti. 2006.
Everyday Lives, Everyday Histories. Tulika, New Delhi.

Irawati Karve. 1968.
Kinship Organisation in India.
Asia Publishing House, Bombay.

R.S. Sharma. 1983.
Perspectives in Social and Economic History of Early India.
Munshiram Manoharlal,
New Delhi.

V.S. Sukthankar. 1957.
On the Meaning of the Mahabharata. Asiatic Society of Bombay, Bombay.

Romila Thapar. 2000.
Cultural Pasts: Essays in Early Indian History. Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

For more information, you could visit:
http://bombay.indology.info/mahabharata/statement.html

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THEME FOUR

THINKERS, BELIEFS AND BUILDINGS

CULTURAL DEVELOPMENTS
(c. 600 BCE - 600 CE)

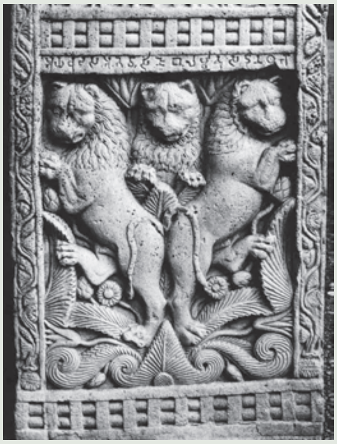
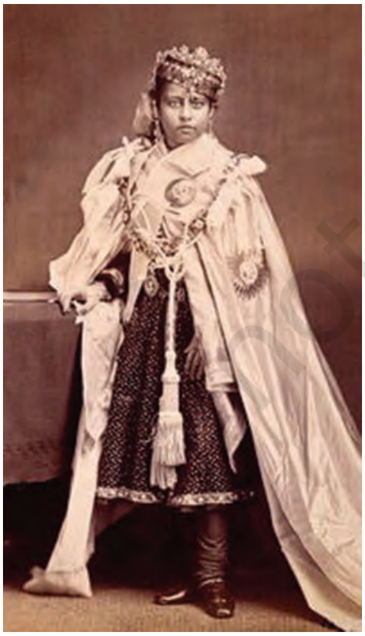


Fig. 4.1
A sculpture from Sanchi

In this chapter we shall go on a long journey across a thousand years to read about philosophers and their attempts to understand the world they inhabited. We will also see how their ideas were compiled as oral and written texts as well as expressed in architecture and sculpture. These are indicative of the enduring influence these thinkers had on people. While we will be focusing on Buddhism, it is important to remember that this tradition did not develop in isolation – there were several other traditions, each engaged in debates and dialogues with the others.

The sources that historians use to reconstruct this exciting world of ideas and beliefs include Buddhist, Jaina and Brahmanical texts, as well as a large and impressive body of material remains including monuments and inscriptions. Among the best preserved monuments of the time is the stupa at Sanchi which is a major focus in this chapter.

Fig. 4.2
Shahjehan Begum



1. A GLIMPSE OF SANCHI

Sanchi in the nineteenth century

The most wonderful ancient buildings in the state of Bhopal are at Sanchi Kanakhera, a small village under the brow of a hill some 20 miles north-east of Bhopal which we visited yesterday. We inspected the stone sculptures and statues of the Buddha and an ancient gateway … The ruins appear to be the object of great interest to European gentlemen. Major Alexander Cunningham … stayed several weeks in this neighbourhood and examined these ruins most carefully. He took drawings of the place, deciphered the inscription, and bored shafts down these domes. The results of his investigations were described by him in an English work …

FROM SHAHJEHAN BEGUM, NAWAB OF BHOPAL (ruled 1868-1901), *Taj- ul Iqbal Tarikh Bhopal (A History of Bhopal)*, translated by H.D. Barstow, 1876.

Nineteenth-century Europeans were very interested in the stupa at Sanchi. In fact, the French sought Shahjehan Begum's permission to take away the eastern gateway, which was the best preserved, to be displayed in a museum in France. For a while some Englishmen also wanted to do the same, but fortunately both the French and the English were satisfied with carefully prepared plaster-cast copies and the original remained at the site, part of the Bhopal state.

The rulers of Bhopal, Shahjehan Begum and her successor Sultan Jehan Begum, provided money for the preservation of the ancient site. No wonder then that John Marshall dedicated his important volumes on Sanchi to Sultan Jehan. She funded the museum that was built there as well as the guesthouse where he lived and wrote the volumes. She also funded the publication of the volumes. So if the stupa complex has survived, it is in no small measure due to wise decisions, and to good luck in escaping the eyes of railway contractors, builders, and those looking for finds to carry away to the museums of Europe. One of the most important Buddhist centres, the discovery of Sanchi has vastly transformed our understanding of early Buddhism. Today it stands testimony to the successful restoration and preservation of a key archaeological site by the Archaeological Survey of India.

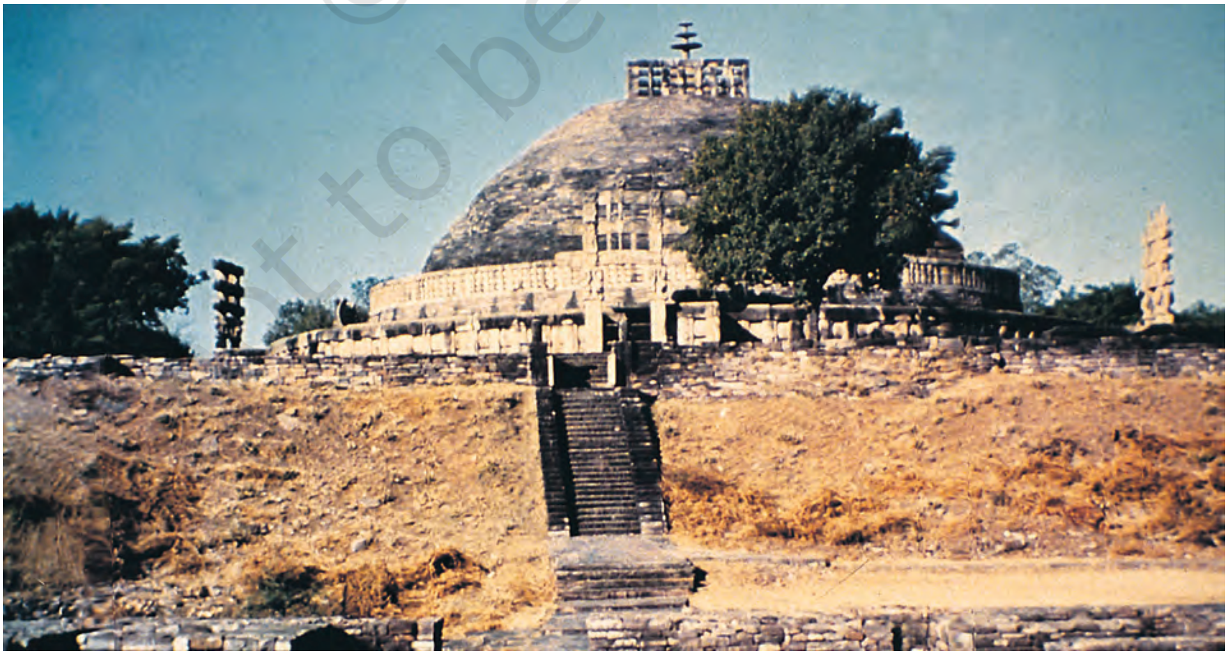


Fig. 4.3
The Great Stupa at Sanchi
If you travel from Delhi to Bhopal by train, you will see the majestic stupa complex on top of a hill, crowning it as it were. If you request the guard he will stop the train at the little station of Sanchi for two minutes – enough time for you to get down. As you climb up the hill you can see the complex of structures: a large mound and other monuments including a temple built in the fifth century.

➲ Discuss...

Compare what Shahjehan Begum described with what you see in Fig. 4.3. What similarities and differences do you notice?

Source 1

A prayer to Agni

Here are two verses from the *Rigveda* invoking Agni, the god of fire, often identified with the sacrificial fire, into which offerings were made so as to reach the other deities:

> Bring, O strong one, this sacrifice of ours to the gods, O wise one, as a liberal giver. Bestow on us, O priest, abundant food. Agni, obtain, by sacrificing, mighty wealth for us.
>
> Procure, O Agni, for ever to him who prays to you (the gift of) nourishment, the wonderful cow. May a son be ours, offspring that continues our line …

Verses such as these were composed in a special kind of Sanskrit, known as Vedic Sanskrit. They were taught orally to men belonging to priestly families.

➲ List the objectives of the sacrifice.

But what is the significance of this monument? Why was the mound built and what did it contain? Why is there a stone railing around it? Who built the complex or paid for its construction? When was it "discovered"? There is a fascinating story that we can uncover at Sanchi for which we must combine information from texts, sculpture, architecture and inscriptions. Let us begin by exploring the background of the early Buddhist tradition.

2. THE BACKGROUND: SACRIFICES AND DEBATES

The mid-first millennium BCE is often regarded as a turning point in world history: it saw the emergence of thinkers such as Zarathustra in Iran, Kong Zi in China, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle in Greece, and Mahavira and Gautama Buddha, among many others, in India. They tried to understand the mysteries of existence and the relationship between human beings and the cosmic order. This was also the time when new kingdoms and cities were developing and social and economic life was changing in a variety of ways in the Ganga valley (Chapters 2 and 3). These thinkers attempted to understand these developments as well.

2.1 The sacrificial tradition

There were several pre-existing traditions of thought, religious belief and practice, including the early Vedic tradition, known from the *Rigveda*, compiled between *c.*1500 and 1000 BCE. The *Rigveda* consists of hymns in praise of a variety of deities, especially Agni, Indra and Soma. Many of these hymns were chanted when sacrifices were performed, where people prayed for cattle, sons, good health, long life, etc.

At first, sacrifices were performed collectively. Later (*c.* 1000 BCE-500 BCE onwards) some were performed by the heads of households for the well-being of the domestic unit. More elaborate sacrifices, such as the *rajasuya* and *ashvamedha*, were performed by chiefs and kings who depended on Brahmana priests to conduct the ritual.

2.2 New questions

Many ideas found in the Upanishads (*c.* sixth century BCE onwards) show that people were curious about the meaning of life, the possibility of life after death, and rebirth. Was rebirth due to past actions? Such issues were hotly debated. Thinkers were concerned with understanding and expressing the nature of the ultimate reality. And others, outside the Vedic tradition, asked whether or not there even was a single ultimate reality. People also began speculating on the significance of the sacrificial tradition.

2.3 Debates and discussions

We get a glimpse of lively discussions and debates from Buddhist texts, which mention as many as 64 sects or schools of thought. Teachers travelled from place to place, trying to convince one another as well as laypersons, about the validity of their philosophy or the way they understood the world. Debates took place in the *kutagarashala* – literally, a hut with a pointed roof – or in groves where travelling mendicants halted. If a philosopher succeeded in convincing one of his rivals, the followers of the latter also became his disciples. So support for any particular sect could grow and shrink over time.

Many of these teachers, including Mahavira and the Buddha, questioned the authority of the Vedas. They also emphasised individual agency – suggesting that men and women could strive to attain liberation from the trials and tribulations of worldly existence. This was in marked contrast to the Brahmanical position, wherein, as we have seen, an individual's existence was thought to be determined by his or her birth in a specific caste or gender.

Source 2

Verses from the Upanishads

Here are two verses from the *Chhandogya Upanishad,* a text composed in Sanskrit *c.* sixth century BCE:

The nature of the self

This self of mine within the heart, is smaller than paddy or barley or mustard or millet or the kernel of a seed of millet. This self of mine within the heart is greater than the earth, greater than the intermediate space, greater than heaven, greater than these worlds.

The true sacrifice

This one (the wind) that blows, this is surely a sacrifice … While moving, it sanctifies all this; therefore it is indeed a sacrifice.

How Buddhist texts were prepared and preserved

The Buddha (and other teachers) taught orally – through discussion and debate. Men and women (perhaps children as well) attended these discourses and discussed what they heard. None of the Buddha's speeches were written down during his lifetime. After his death (*c.* fifth-fourth century BCE) his teachings were compiled by his disciples at a council of "elders" or senior monks at Vesali (Pali for Vaishali in present-day Bihar). These compilations were known as *Tipitaka* – literally, three baskets to hold different types of texts. They were first transmitted orally and then written and classified according to length as well as subject matter.

The *Vinaya Pitaka* included rules and regulations for those who joined the *sangha* or monastic order; the Buddha's teachings were included in the *Sutta Pitaka*; and the *Abhidhamma Pitaka* dealt with philosophical matters. Each *pitaka* comprised a number of individual texts. Later, commentaries were written on these texts by Buddhist scholars.

As Buddhism travelled to new regions such as Sri Lanka, other texts such as the *Dipavamsa* (literally, the chronicle of the island) and *Mahavamsa* (the great chronicle) were written, containing regional histories of Buddhism. Many of these works contained biographies of the Buddha. Some of the oldest texts are in Pali, while later compositions are in Sanskrit.

When Buddhism spread to East Asia, pilgrims such as Fa Xian and Xuan Zang travelled all the way from China to India in search of texts. These they took back to their own country, where they were translated by scholars. Indian Buddhist teachers also travelled to faraway places, carrying texts to disseminate the teachings of the Buddha.

Buddhist texts were preserved in manuscripts for several centuries in monasteries in different parts of Asia. Modern translations have been prepared from Pali, Sanskrit, Chinese and Tibetan texts.

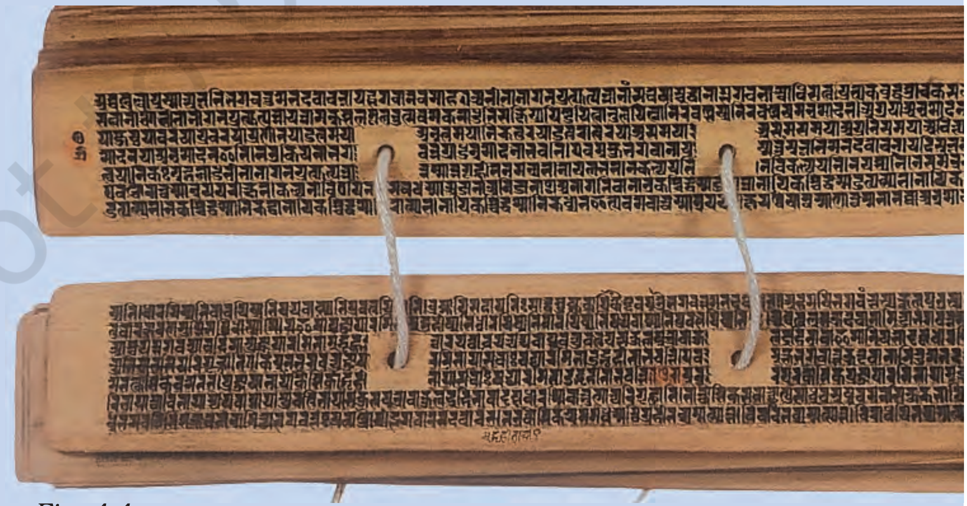


Fig. 4.4
A Buddhist manuscript in Sanskrit, c. twelfth century

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Source 3

Fatalists and materialists?

Here is an excerpt from the *Sutta Pitaka*, describing a conversation between king Ajatasattu, the ruler of Magadha, and the Buddha:

> On one occasion King Ajatasattu visited the Buddha and described what another teacher, named Makkhali Gosala, had told him:
>
> "Though the wise should hope, by this virtue … by this penance I will gain karma … and the fool should by the same means hope to gradually rid himself of his karma, neither of them can do it. Pleasure and pain, measured out as it were, cannot be altered in the course of *samsara* (transmigration). It can neither be lessened or increased … just as a ball of string will when thrown unwind to its full length, so fool and wise alike will take their course and make an end of sorrow."
>
> And this is what a philosopher named Ajita Kesakambalin taught:
>
> "There is no such thing, O king, as alms or sacrifice, or offerings … there is no such thing as this world or the next …
>
> A human being is made up of the four elements. When he dies the earthy in him returns to the earth, the fluid to water, the heat to fire, the windy to air, and his senses pass into space …
>
> The talk of gifts is a doctrine of fools, an empty lie … fools and wise alike are cut off and perish. They do not survive after death."

The first teacher belonged to the tradition of the Ajivikas. They have often been described as fatalists: those who believe that everything is predetermined. The second teacher belonged to the tradition of the Lokayatas, usually described as materialists. Texts from these traditions have not survived, so we know about them only from the works of other traditions.

➲ Do you think it is appropriate to describe these men as fatalists or materialists?

➲ Discuss...

What are the problems in reconstructing histories of ideas and beliefs when texts are not available or have not survived?

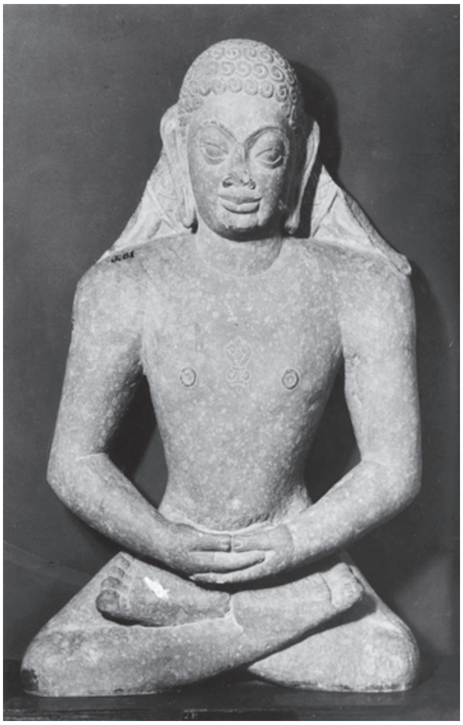


Fig. 4.5
An image of a tirthankara *from Mathura,* c. *third century* CE

3. BEYOND WORLDLY PLEASURES

THE MESSAGE OF MAHAVIRA

The basic philosophy of the Jainas was already in existence in north India before the birth of Vardhamana, who came to be known as Mahavira, in the sixth century BCE. According to Jaina tradition, Mahavira was preceded by 23 other teachers or *tirthankaras* – literally, those who guide men and women across the river of existence.

The most important idea in Jainism is that the entire world is animated: even stones, rocks and water have life. Non-injury to living beings, especially to humans, animals, plants and insects, is central to Jaina philosophy. In fact the principle of ahimsa, emphasised within Jainism, has left its mark on Indian thinking as a whole. According to Jaina teachings, the cycle of birth and rebirth is shaped through karma. Asceticism and penance are required to free oneself from the cycle of karma. This can be achieved only by renouncing the world; therefore, monastic existence is a necessary condition of salvation. Jaina monks and nuns took five vows: to abstain from killing, stealing and lying; to observe celibacy; and to abstain from possessing property.

Source 4

The world beyond the palace

Just as the Buddha's teachings were compiled by his followers, the teachings of Mahavira were also recorded by his disciples. These were often in the form of stories, which could appeal to ordinary people. Here is one example, from a Prakrit text known as the *Uttaradhyayana Sutta,* describing how a queen named Kamalavati tried to persuade her husband to renounce the world:

> If the whole world and all its treasures were yours, you would not be satisfied, nor would all this be able to save you. When you die, O king and leave all things behind, *dhamma* alone, and nothing else, will save you. As a bird dislikes the cage, so do I dislike (the world). I shall live as a nun without offspring, without desire, without the love of gain, and without hatred …
>
> Those who have enjoyed pleasures and renounced them, move about like the wind, and go wherever they please, unchecked like birds in their flight …
>
> Leave your large kingdom … abandon what pleases the senses, be without attachment and property, then practise severe penance, being firm of energy …

➲ Which of the arguments advanced by the queen do you find most convincing?

3.1 The spread of Jainism

Gradually, Jainism spread to many parts of India. Like the Buddhists, Jaina scholars produced a wealth of literature in a variety of languages – Prakrit, Sanskrit and Tamil. For centuries, manuscripts of these texts were carefully preserved in libraries attached to temples.

Some of the earliest stone sculptures associated with religious traditions were produced by devotees of the Jaina *tirthankaras*, and have been recovered from several sites throughout the subcontinent.

➲ Discuss...

Is ahimsa relevant in the twenty-first century?

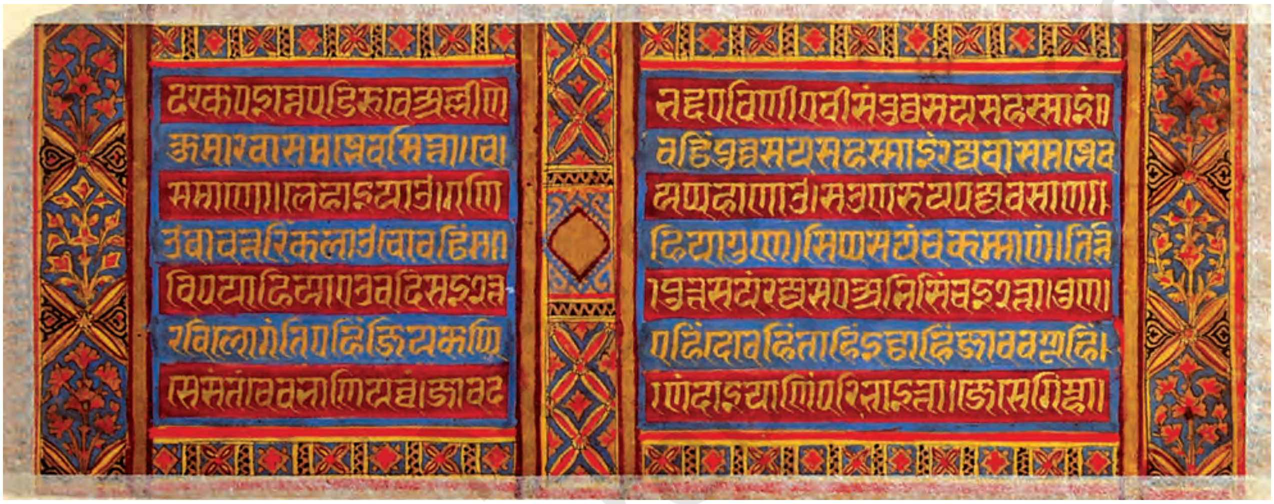


Fig. 4.6
A page from a fourteenth-century Jaina manuscript

➲ Can you identify the script?

4. THE BUDDHA AND THE QUEST FOR ENLIGHTENMENT

One of the most influential teachers of the time was the Buddha. Over the centuries, his message spread across the subcontinent and beyond – through Central Asia to China, Korea and Japan, and through Sri Lanka, across the seas to Myanmar, Thailand and Indonesia.

How do we know about the Buddha's teachings? These have been reconstructed by carefully editing, translating and analysing the Buddhist texts mentioned earlier. Historians have also tried to reconstruct details of his life from hagiographies. Many of these were written down at least a century after the time of the Buddha, in an attempt to preserve memories of the great teacher.

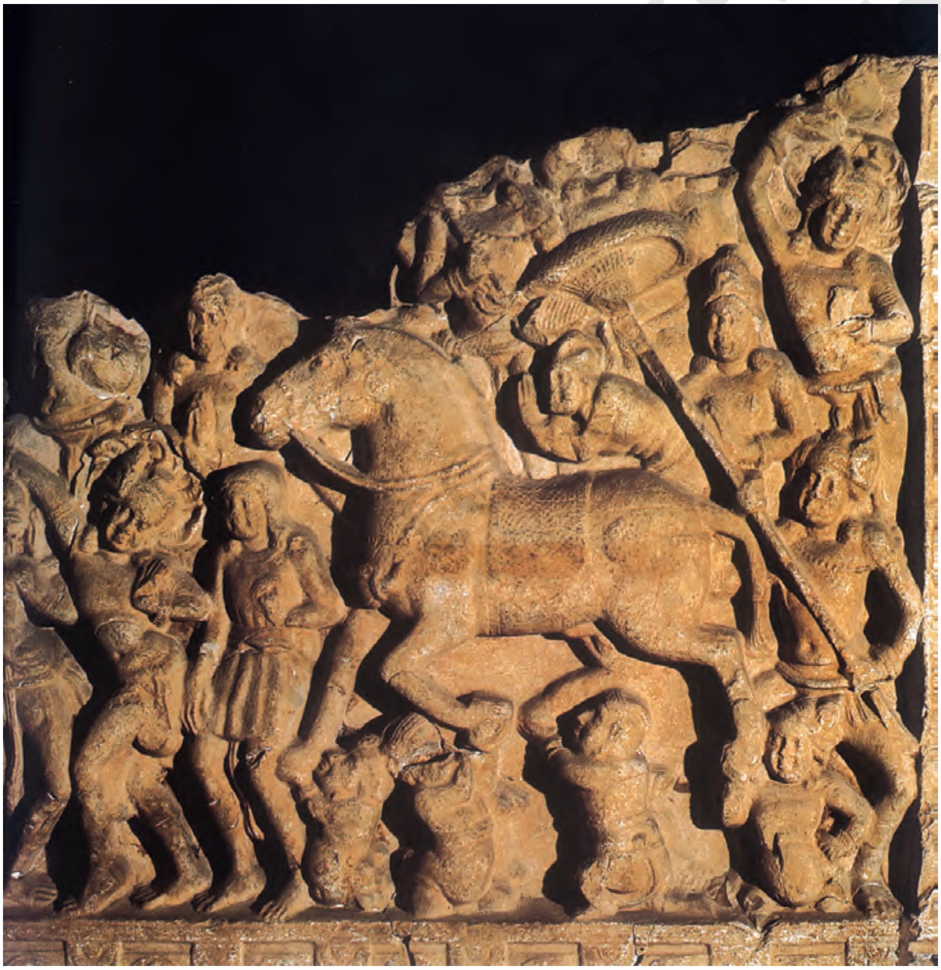
According to these traditions, Siddhartha, as the Buddha was named at birth, was the son of a chief

Hagiography is a biography of a saint or religious leader. Hagiographies often praise the saint's achievements, and may not always be literally accurate. They are important because they tell us about the beliefs of the followers of that particular tradition.

of the Sakya clan. He had a sheltered upbringing within the palace, insulated from the harsh realities of life. One day he persuaded his charioteer to take him into the city. His first journey into the world outside was traumatic. He was deeply anguished when he saw an old man, a sick man and a corpse. He realised in that moment that the decay and destruction of the human body was inevitable. He also saw a homeless mendicant, who, it seemed to him, had come to terms with old age, disease and death, and found peace. Siddhartha decided that he too would adopt the same path. Soon after, he left the palace and set out in search of his own truth.

Siddhartha explored several paths including bodily mortification which led him to a situation of near death. Abandoning these extreme methods, he meditated for several days and finally attained enlightenment. After this he came to be known as the Buddha or the Enlightened One. For the rest of his life, he taught *dhamma* or the path of righteous living.

Fig. 4.7
A sculpture (c. 200 CE) from Amaravati (Andhra Pradesh), depicting the departure of the Buddha from his palace



➲ Discuss...

If you did not know about the life of the Buddha, would you be able to tell what the sculpture depicts?

5. THE TEACHINGS OF THE BUDDHA

The Buddha's teachings have been reconstructed from stories, found mainly in the *Sutta Pitaka*. Although some stories describe his miraculous powers, others suggest that the Buddha tried to convince people through reason and persuasion rather than through displays of supernatural power. For instance, when a grief-stricken woman whose child had died came to the Buddha, he gently convinced her about the inevitability of death rather than bring her son back to life. These stories were narrated in the language spoken by ordinary people so that these could be easily understood.

According to Buddhist philosophy, the world is transient (*anicca*) and constantly changing; it is also soulless (*anatta*) as there is nothing permanent or eternal in it. Within this transient world, sorrow (*dukkha*) is intrinsic to human existence. It is by following the path of moderation between severe penance and self-indulgence that human beings can rise above these worldly troubles. In the earliest forms of Buddhism, whether or not god existed was irrelevant.

Source 5

Buddhism in practice

This is an excerpt from the *Sutta Pitaka*, and contains the advice given by the Buddha to a wealthy householder named Sigala:

> In five ways should a master look after his servants and employees … by assigning them work according to their strength, by supplying them with food and wages, by tending them in sickness; by sharing delicacies with them and by granting leave at times …
>
> In five ways should the clansmen look after the needs of *samanas* (those who have renounced the world) and Brahmanas: by affection in act and speech and mind, by keeping open house to them and supplying their worldly needs.

There are similar instructions to Sigala about how to behave with his parents, teacher and wife.

➲ Suggest what the instructions regarding parents, teacher and wife may have been.

➲ Discuss...

Compare the Buddha's advice to Sigala with Asoka's advice to his subjects (Chapter 2). Do you notice any similarities and differences?

The Buddha regarded the social world as the creation of humans rather than of divine origin. Therefore, he advised kings and *gahapatis* (see also Chapter 2) to be humane and ethical. Individual effort was expected to transform social relations.

The Buddha emphasised individual agency and righteous action as the means to escape from the cycle of rebirth and attain self-realisation and *nibbana*, literally the extinguishing of the ego and desire – and thus end the cycle of suffering for those who renounced the world. According to Buddhist tradition, his last words to his followers were: "Be lamps unto yourselves as all of you must work out your own liberation."

6. FOLLOWERS OF THE BUDDHA

Soon there grew a body of disciples of the Buddha and he founded a *sangha*, an organisation of monks who too became teachers of *dhamma*. These monks lived simply, possessing only the essential requisites for survival, such as a bowl to receive food once a day from the laity. As they lived on alms, they were known as *bhikkhus*.

Initially, only men were allowed into the *sangha*, but later women also came to be admitted. According to Buddhist texts, this was made possible through the mediation of Ananda, one of the Buddha's dearest disciples, who persuaded him to allow women into the *sangha*. The Buddha's foster mother, Mahapajapati Gotami was the first woman to be ordained as a *bhikkhuni*. Many women who entered the *sangha* became teachers of *dhamma* and went on to become *theris*, or respected women who had attained liberation.

The Buddha's followers came from many social groups. They included kings, wealthy men and *gahapatis*, and also humbler folk: workers, slaves and craftspeople. Once within the *sangha*, all were regarded as equal, having shed their earlier social identities on becoming *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis*. The internal functioning of the *sangha* was based on the traditions of *ganas* and *sanghas*, where consensus was arrived at through discussions. If that failed, decisions were taken by a vote on the subject.

Source 6

The *Therigatha*

This unique Buddhist text, part of the *Sutta Pitaka*, is a collection of verses composed by *bhikkhunis*. It provides an insight into women's social and spiritual experiences. Punna, a *dasi* or slave woman, went to the river each morning to fetch water for her master's household. There she would daily see a Brahmana performing bathing rituals. One morning she spoke to him. The following are verses composed by Punna, recording her conversation with the Brahmana:

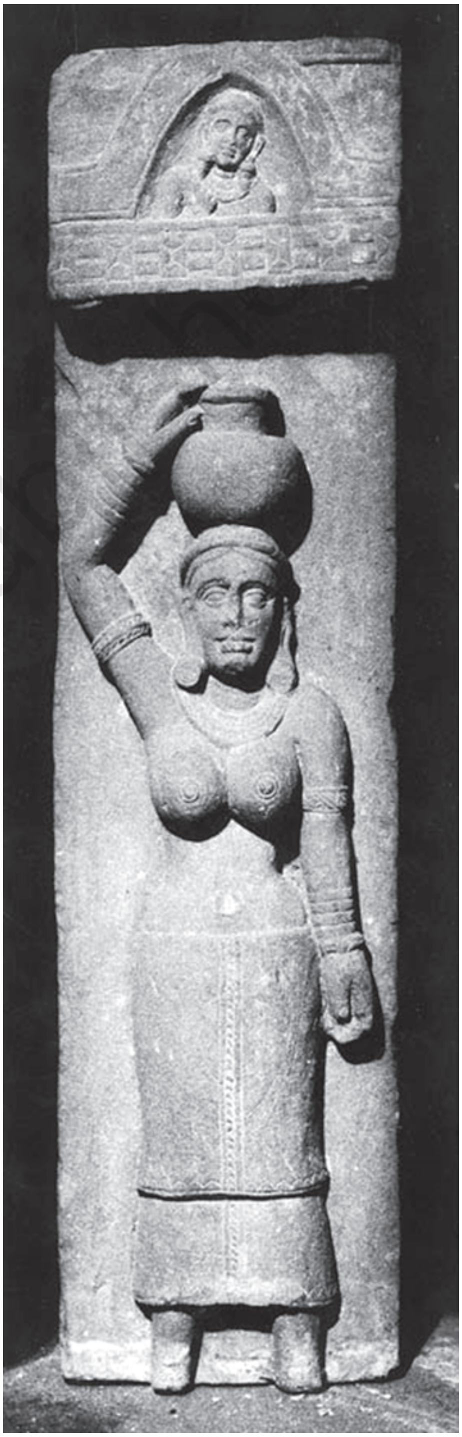
I am a water carrier:
Even in the cold
I have always gone down to the water
frightened of punishment
Or the angry words of high class women.
So what are you afraid of Brahmana,
That makes you go down to the water
(Though) your limbs shake with the bitter cold?

The Brahmana replied:
I am doing good to prevent evil;
anyone young or old
who has done something bad
is freed by washing in water.

Punna said:
Whoever told you
You are freed from evil by washing in the water?…
In that case all the frogs and turtles
Would go to heaven, and so would the water snakes
and crocodiles!
(Instead) Don't do that thing,
the fear of which
leads you to the water.
Stop now Brahmana!
Save your skin from the cold …

➲ Which of the teachings of the Buddha are evident in this composition?

Fig. 4.8
A woman water-carrier, Mathura,
c. third century CE



Source 7

Rules for monks and nuns

These are some of the rules laid down in the *Vinaya Pitaka:*

> When a new felt (blanket/rug) has been made by a *bhikkhu*, it is to be kept for (at least) six years. If after less than six years he should have another new felt (blanket/rug) made, regardless of whether or not he has disposed of the first, then – unless he has been authorised by the *bhikkhus* – it is to be forfeited and confessed.
>
> In case a *bhikkhu* arriving at a family residence is presented with cakes or cooked grain-meal, he may accept two or three bowlfuls if he so desires. If he should accept more than that, it is to be confessed. Having accepted the two or three bowlfuls and having taken them from there, he is to share them among the *bhikkhus*. This is the proper course here.
>
> Should any *bhikkhu*, having set out bedding in a lodging belonging to the *sangha* – or having had it set out – and then on departing neither put it away nor have it put away, or should he go without taking leave, it is to be confessed.

➲ Can you explain why these rules were framed?

Buddhism grew rapidly both during the lifetime of the Buddha and after his death, as it appealed to many people dissatisfied with existing religious practices and confused by the rapid social changes taking place around them. The importance attached to conduct and values rather than claims of superiority based on birth, the emphasis placed on *metta* (fellow feeling) and *karuna* (compassion), especially for those who were younger and weaker than oneself, were ideas that drew men and women to Buddhist teachings.

➲ Discuss...

Why do you think a *dasi* like Punna wanted to join the *sangha*?

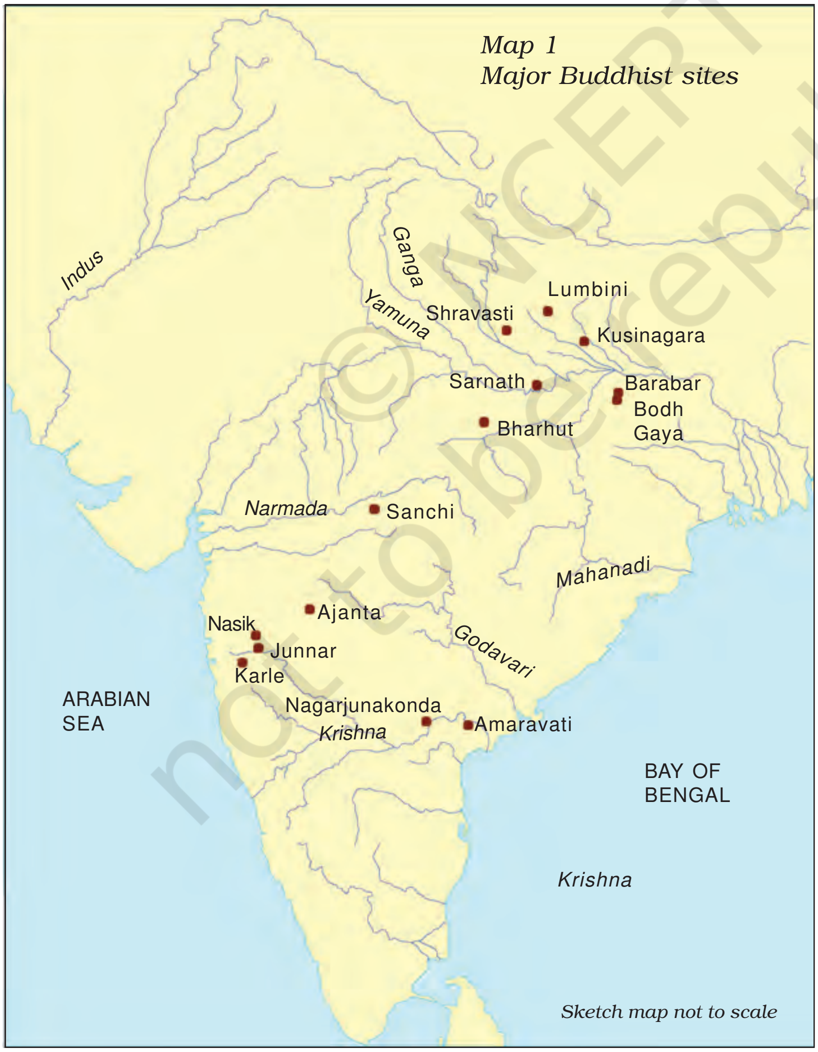
7. STUPAS

We have seen that Buddhist ideas and practices emerged out of a process of dialogue with other traditions – including those of the Brahmanas, Jainas and several others, not all of whose ideas and practices were preserved in texts. Some of these interactions can be seen in the ways in which sacred places came to be identified.

From earliest times, people tended to regard certain places as sacred. These included sites with special trees or unique rocks, or sites of awe-inspiring natural beauty. These sites, with small shrines attached to them, were sometimes described as *chaityas*.

Buddhist literature mentions several *chaityas*. It also describes places associated with the

Chaitya may also have been derived from the word *chita*, meaning a funeral pyre, and by extension a funerary mound.


Map 1
Major Buddhist sites
Indus
Ganga
Yamuna
Lumbini
Shravasti
Kusinagara
Sarnath
Barabar
Bodh Gaya
Bharhut
Narmada
Sanchi
Mahanadi
Ajanta
Nasik
Junnar
Karle
Godavari
ARABIAN SEA
Nagarjunakonda
Krishna
Amaravati
BAY OF BENGAL
Krishna
Sketch map not to scale

Buddha's life – where he was born (Lumbini), where he attained enlightenment (Bodh Gaya), where he gave his first sermon (Sarnath) and where he attained *nibbana* (Kusinagara). Gradually, each of these places came to be regarded as sacred. We know that about 200 years after the time of the Buddha, Asoka erected a pillar at Lumbini to mark the fact that he had visited the place.

7.1 Why were stupas built?

There were other places too that were regarded as sacred. This was because relics of the Buddha such as his bodily remains or objects used by him were buried there. These were mounds known as stupas.

The tradition of erecting stupas may have been pre-Buddhist, but they came to be associated with Buddhism. Since they contained relics regarded as sacred, the entire stupa came to be venerated as an emblem of both the Buddha and Buddhism. According to a Buddhist text known as the *Ashokavadana*, Asoka distributed portions of the Buddha's relics to every important town and ordered the construction of stupas over them. By the second century BCE a number of stupas, including those at Bharhut, Sanchi and Sarnath (Map 1), had been built.

7.2 How were stupas built?

Inscriptions found on the railings and pillars of stupas record donations made for building and decorating them. Some donations were made by kings such as the Satavahanas; others were made by guilds, such as that of the ivory workers who financed part of one of the gateways at Sanchi. Hundreds of donations were made by women and men who mention their names, sometimes adding the name of the place from where they came, as well as their occupations and names of their relatives. *Bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis* also contributed towards building these monuments.

7.3 The structure of the stupa

The stupa (a Sanskrit word meaning a heap) originated as a simple semi-circular mound of earth, later called *anda*. Gradually, it evolved into a more complex structure, balancing round and square shapes. Above the *anda* was the *harmika*, a balcony-like structure that represented the abode of the gods.

Source 8

Why were stupas built?

This is an excerpt from the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta*, part of the *Sutta Pitaka:*

> As the Buddha lay dying, Ananda asked him:
>
> "What are we to do Lord, with the remains of the Tathagata (another name for the Buddha)?"
>
> The Buddha replied: "Hinder not yourselves Ananda by honouring the remains of the Tathagata. Be zealous, be intent on your own good."
>
> But when pressed further, the Buddha said:
>
> "At the four crossroads they should erect a *thupa* (Pali for stupa) to the Tathagata. And whosoever shall there place garlands or perfume … or make a salutation there, or become in its presence calm of heart, that shall long be to them for a profit and joy."

➲ Look at Fig. 4.15 and see whether you can identify some of these practices.

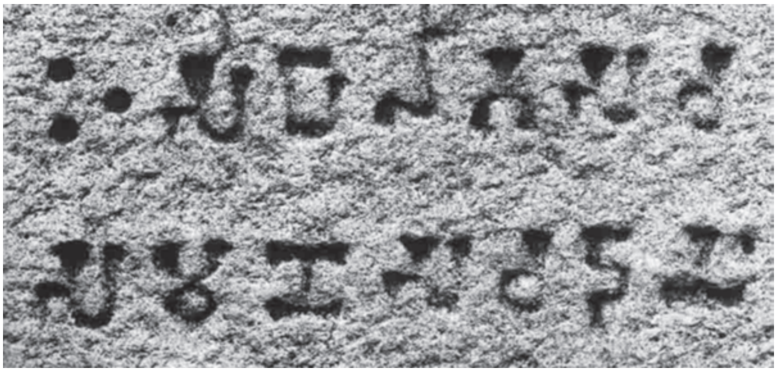


Fig. 4.9
A votive inscription from Sanchi
Hundreds of similar inscriptions have also been found at Bharhut and Amaravati.

Arising from the *harmika* was a mast called the *yashti*, often surmounted by a *chhatri* or umbrella. Around the mound was a railing, separating the sacred space from the secular world.

The early stupas at Sanchi and Bharhut were plain except for the stone railings, which resembled a bamboo or wooden fence, and the gateways, which were richly carved and installed at the four cardinal points. Worshippers entered through the eastern gateway and walked around the mound in a clockwise direction keeping the mound on the right, imitating the sun's course through the sky. Later, the mound of the stupas came to be elaborately carved with niches and sculptures as at Amaravati, and Shah-ji-ki-Dheri in Peshawar (Pakistan).

➲ Discuss...

What are the similarities and differences between the plan of the Great Stupa, Sanchi (Fig. 4.10a) and the photograph (Fig. 4.3)?

➲ What are the features of the building that are clearest in the plan? What are the features that are best seen in the elevation?

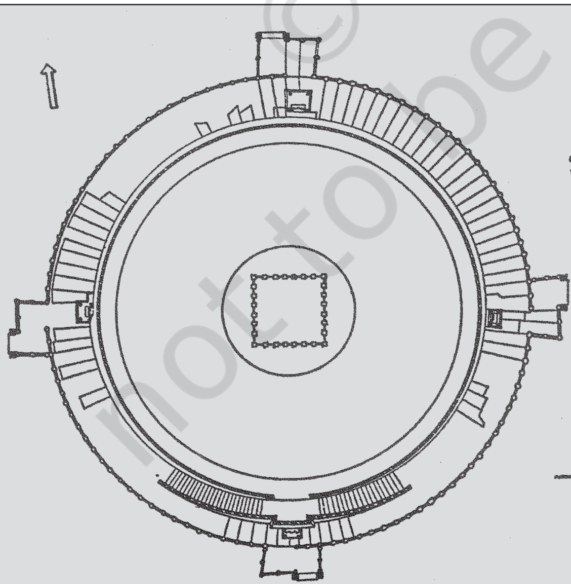


Fig. 4.10a
Plan of the Great Stupa at Sanchi
A plan provides a horizontal perspective of a building.

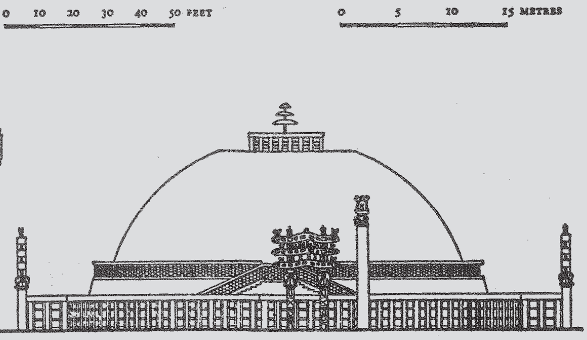


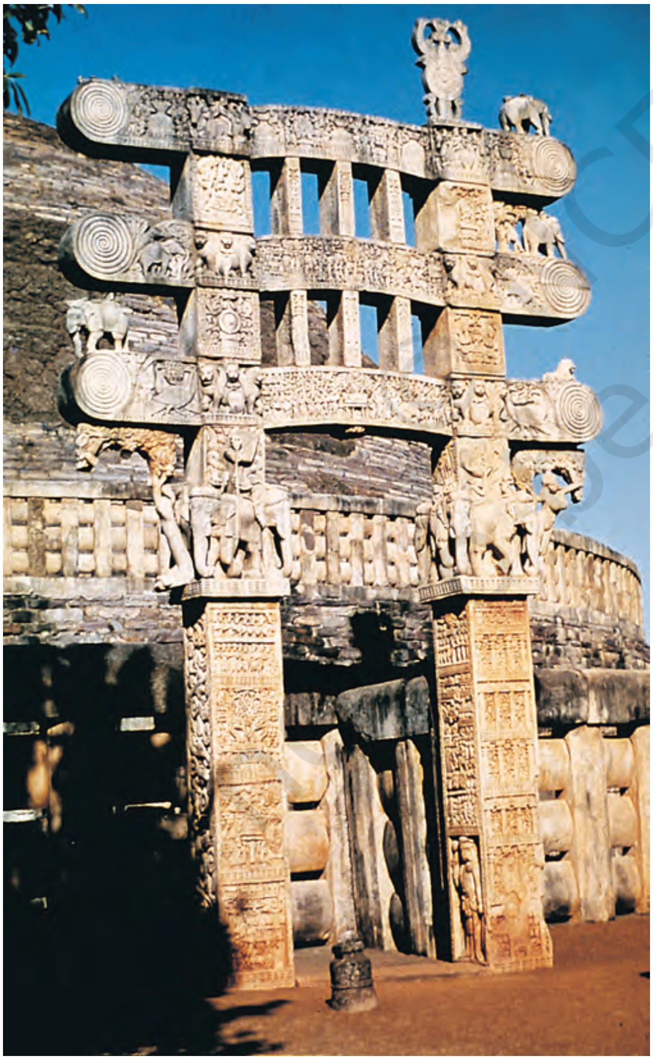
Fig. 4.10b
An elevation of the Great Stupa
An elevation provides a vertical perspective.

8. "DISCOVERING" STUPAS

THE FATE OF AMARAVATI AND SANCHI

Each stupa has a history of its own – as we have just seen, some of these are histories of how they were built. But there are histories of discoveries as well, and let us now turn to some of these. In 1796, a local raja who wanted to build a temple stumbled upon the ruins of the stupa at Amaravati. He decided to use the stone, and thought there might be some treasure buried in what seemed to be a hill. Some years later, a British official named Colin Mackenzie (see also Chapter 7) visited the site. Although he found several pieces of sculpture and made detailed drawings of them, these reports were never published.

Fig. 4.11
The eastern gateway, Sanchi
Notice the vibrant sculpture.



In 1854, Walter Elliot, the commissioner of Guntur (Andhra Pradesh), visited Amaravati and collected several sculpture panels and took them away to Madras. (These came to be called the Elliot marbles after him.) He also discovered the remains of the western gateway and came to the conclusion that the structure at Amaravati was one of the largest and most magnificent Buddhist stupas ever built. By the 1850s, some of the slabs from Amaravati had begun to be taken to different places: to the Asiatic Society of Bengal at Calcutta, to the India Office in Madras and some even to London. It was not unusual to find these sculptures adorning the gardens of British administrators. In fact, any new official in the area continued to remove sculptures from the site on the grounds that earlier officials had done the same.

One of the few men who had a different point of view was an archaeologist named H.H. Cole. He wrote: "It seems to me a suicidal and indefensible policy to allow the country to be looted of original works of ancient art." He believed that museums should have plaster-cast facsimiles of sculpture, whereas the originals should remain where they had been found. Unfortunately, Cole did not succeed in convincing the authorities about Amaravati, although his plea for *in situ* preservation was adopted in the case of Sanchi.

Why did Sanchi survive while Amaravati did not? Perhaps Amaravati was discovered before scholars understood the value of the finds and realised how critical it was to preserve things where they had been found instead of removing them from the site. When Sanchi was "discovered" in 1818, three of its four gateways were still standing, the fourth was lying on the spot where it had fallen and the mound was in good condition. Even so, it was suggested that the gateway be taken to either Paris or London; finally a number of factors helped to keep Sanchi as it was, and so it stands, whereas the *mahachaitya* at Amaravati is now just an insignificant little mound, totally denuded of its former glory.

➲ Discuss...

Read Section 1 again. Give your reasons why Sanchi survived.

In situ means on the spot.

9. SCULPTURE

We have just seen how sculptures were removed from stupas and transported all the way to Europe. This happened partly because those who saw them considered them to be beautiful and valuable, and wanted to keep them for themselves. Let us look at some of these more closely.

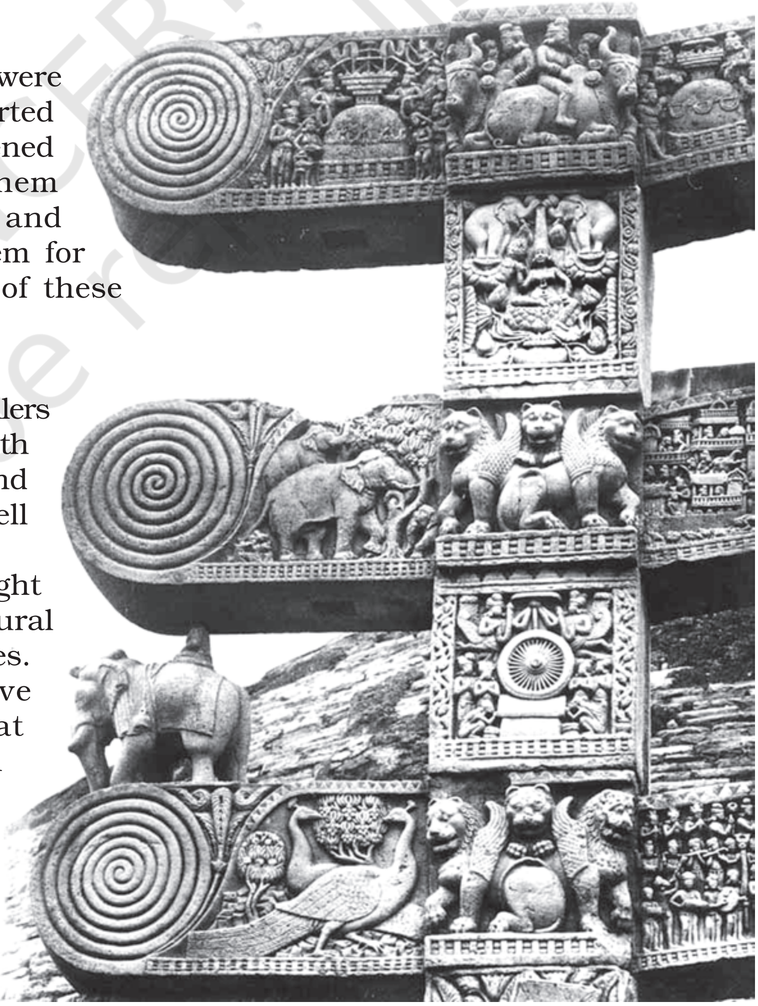


Fig. 4.12
A section of the gateway
Do you think the sculptors at Sanchi wanted to depict a scroll being unfurled?

9.1 Stories in stone

You may have seen wandering storytellers carrying scrolls (*charanachitras*) of cloth or paper with pictures on them and pointing to the pictures as they tell the story.

Look at Figure 4.13. At first sight the sculpture seems to depict a rural scene, with thatched huts and trees. However, art historians who have carefully studied the sculpture at Sanchi identify it as a scene from the *Vessantara Jataka*. This is a story about a generous prince who gave away everything to a Brahmana, and went to live in the forest with his wife and children. As you can see in this

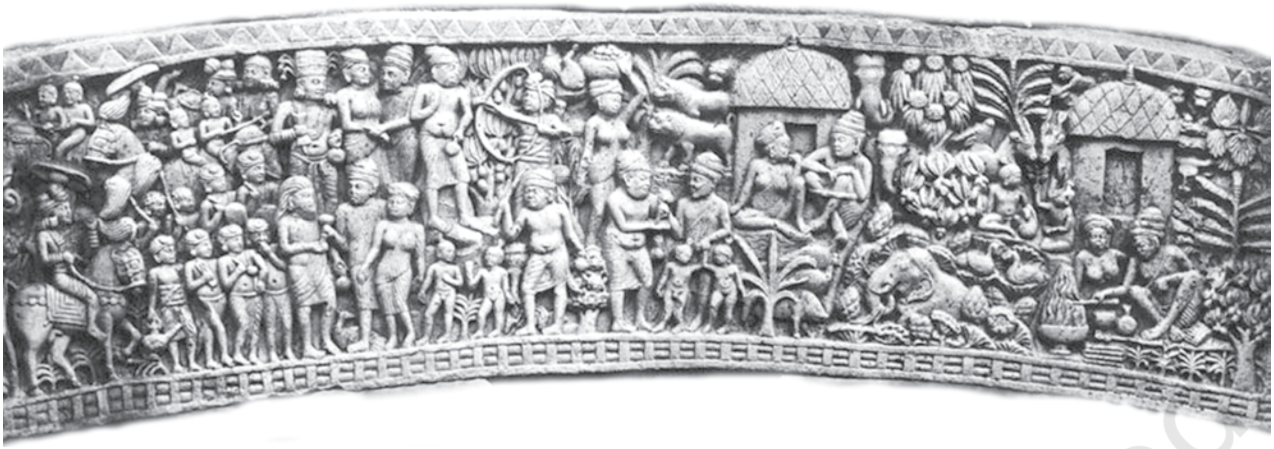


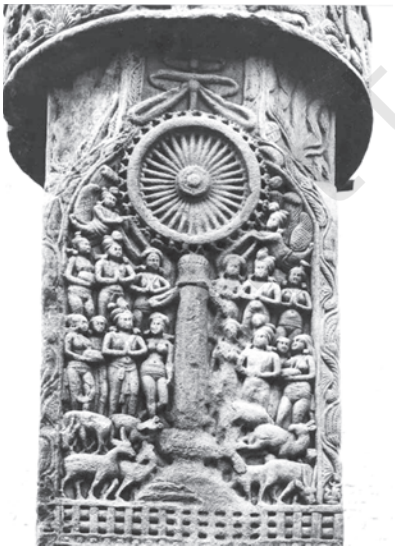
Fig. 4.13
A part of the northern gateway

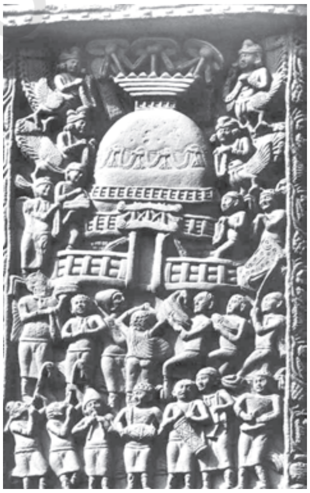
case, historians often try to understand the meaning of sculpture by comparing it with textual evidence.

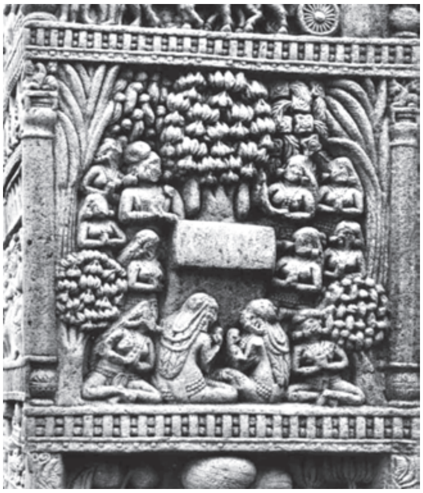
9.2 Symbols of worship

Art historians had to acquire familiarity with hagiographies of the Buddha in order to understand Buddhist sculpture. According to hagiographies, the Buddha attained enlightenment while meditating under a tree. Many early sculptors did not show the Buddha in human form – instead, they showed his presence through symbols. The empty seat (Fig. 4.14) was meant to indicate the meditation of the Buddha, and the stupa (Fig. 4.15) was meant to represent the *mahaparinibbana.* Another frequently used symbol was the wheel (Fig. 4.16). This stood for the first sermon of the Buddha, delivered at Sarnath. As is obvious, such sculptures cannot be understood literally – for instance, the tree does not stand

Fig. 4.14 (far right)
Worshipping the Bodhi tree
Notice the tree, the seat, and the people around it.
Fig. 4.15 (middle right)
Worshipping the stupa
Fig. 4.16 (below)
Setting in motion the wheel of dharma







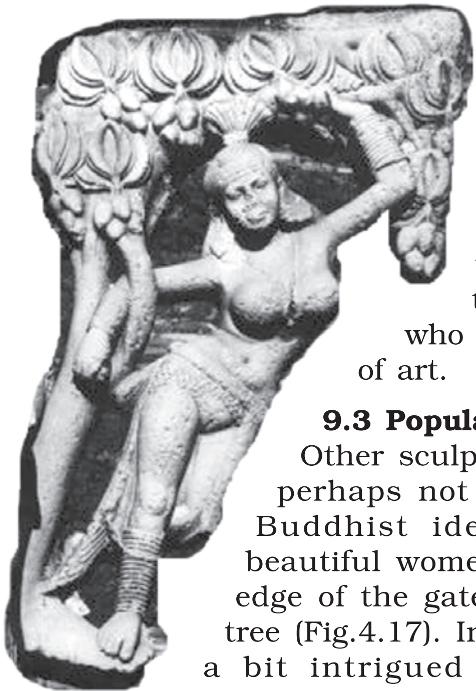


Fig. 4.17
The woman at the gate

simply for a tree, but symbolises an event in the life of the Buddha. In order to understand such symbols, historians have to familiarise themselves with the traditions of those who produced these works of art.

9.3 Popular traditions

Other sculptures at Sanchi were perhaps not directly inspired by Buddhist ideas. These include beautiful women swinging from the edge of the gateway, holding onto a tree (Fig.4.17). Initially, scholars were a bit intrigued about this image, which seemed to have little to do with renunciation. However, after examining other literary traditions, they realised that it could be a representation of what is described in Sanskrit as a *shalabhanjika*. According to popular belief, this was a woman whose touch caused trees to flower and bear fruit. It is likely that this was regarded as an auspicious symbol and integrated into the decoration of the stupa. The *shalabhanjika* motif suggests that many people who turned to Buddhism enriched it with their own pre-Buddhist and even non-Buddhist beliefs, practices and ideas. Some of the recurrent motifs in the sculpture at Sanchi were evidently derived from these traditions.

There are other images as well. For instance, some of the finest depictions of animals are found there. These animals include elephants, horses, monkeys and cattle. While the *Jatakas* contain several animal stories that are depicted at Sanchi, it is likely that many of these animals were carved to create lively scenes to draw viewers. Also, animals were often used as symbols of human attributes. Elephants, for example, were depicted to signify strength and wisdom.

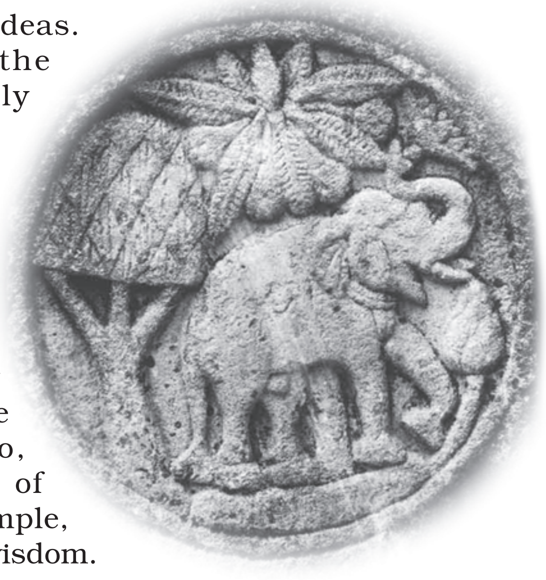


Fig. 4.18
An elephant at Sanchi

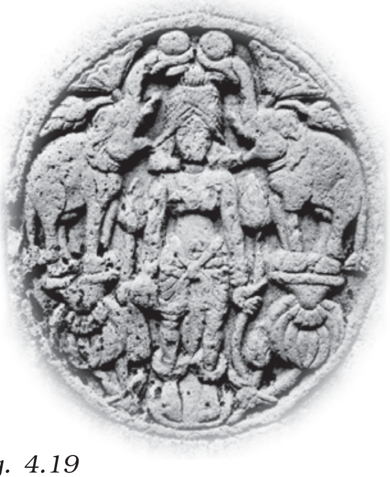


Fig. 4.19
Gajalakshmi

Paintings from the past

While stone sculpture survives the ravages of time and is therefore most easily available to the historian, other visual means of communication, including paintings, were also used in the past. Those that have survived best are on walls of caves, of which those from Ajanta (Maharashtra) are the most famous.

The paintings at Ajanta depict stories from the *Jatakas*. These include depictions of courtly life, processions, men and women at work, and festivals. The artists used the technique of shading to give a three-dimensional quality. Some of the paintings are extremely naturalistic.

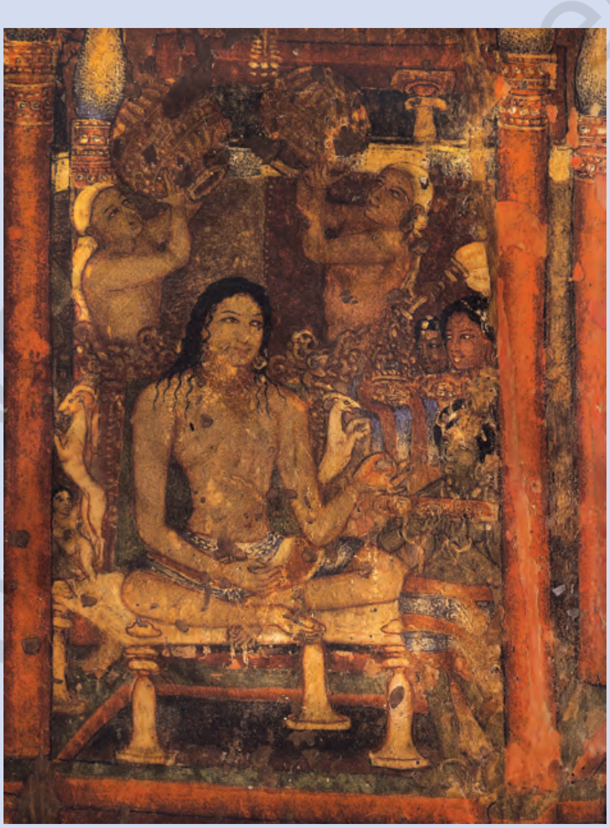
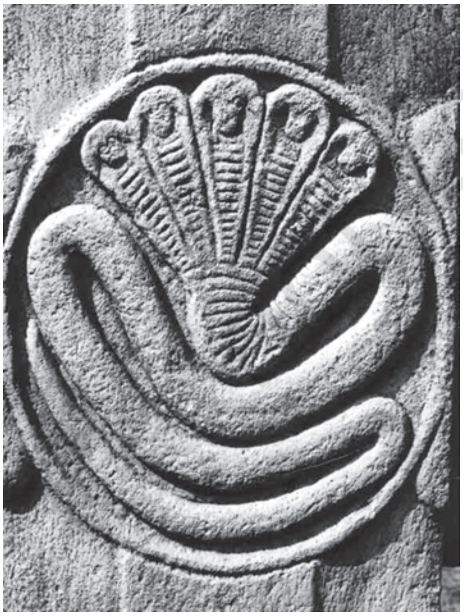


Fig. 4.20
A painting from Ajanta
Note the seated figure and those serving him.

Fig. 4.21
A serpent at Sanchi



Another motif is that of a woman surrounded by lotuses and elephants (Fig. 4.19), which seem to be sprinkling water on her as if performing an *abhisheka* or consecration. While some historians identify the figure as Maya, the mother of the Buddha, others identify her with a popular goddess, Gajalakshmi – literally, the goddess of good fortune – who is associated with elephants. It is also possible that devotees who saw these sculptures identified the figure with both Maya and Gajalakshmi.

Consider, too, the serpent, which is found on several pillars (Fig. 4.21). This motif seems to be derived from popular traditions, which were not always recorded in texts. Interestingly, one of the earliest modern art historians, James Fergusson, considered Sanchi to be a centre of tree and serpent worship. He was not familiar with Buddhist literature – most of which had not yet been translated – and arrived at this conclusion by studying only the images on their own.

➲ Discuss...

Bone, terracotta and metal can also be used for sculpture. Find out more about these.

10. NEW RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

10.1 The development of Mahayana Buddhism

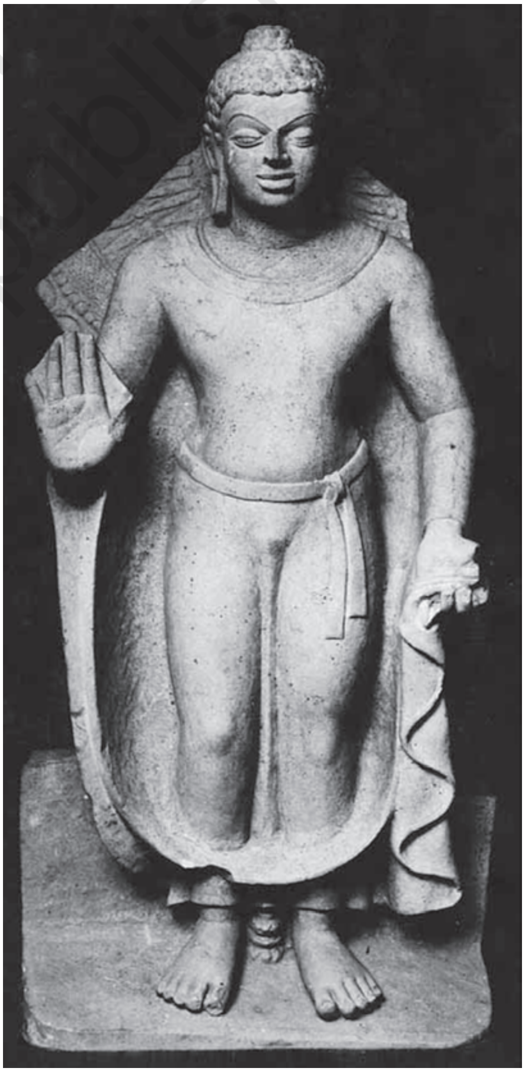
By the first century CE, there is evidence of changes in Buddhist ideas and practices. Early Buddhist teachings had given great importance to self-effort in achieving *nibbana*. Besides, the Buddha was regarded as a human being who attained enlightenment and *nibbana* through his own efforts. However, gradually the idea of a saviour emerged. It was believed that he was the one who could ensure salvation. Simultaneously, the concept of the Bodhisatta also developed. Bodhisattas were perceived as deeply compassionate beings who accumulated merit through their efforts but used this not to attain *nibbana* and thereby abandon the world, but to help others. The worship of images of the Buddha and Bodhisattas became an important part of this tradition.

This new way of thinking was called Mahayana – literally, the “great vehicle”. Those who adopted these beliefs described the older tradition as Hinayana or the “lesser vehicle”.

Hinayana or Theravada?

Supporters of Mahayana regarded other Buddhists as followers of Hinayana. However, followers of the older tradition described themselves as *theravadins*, that is, those who followed the path of old, respected teachers, the *theras*.

Fig. 4.22
An image of the Buddha from Mathura, c. first century CE

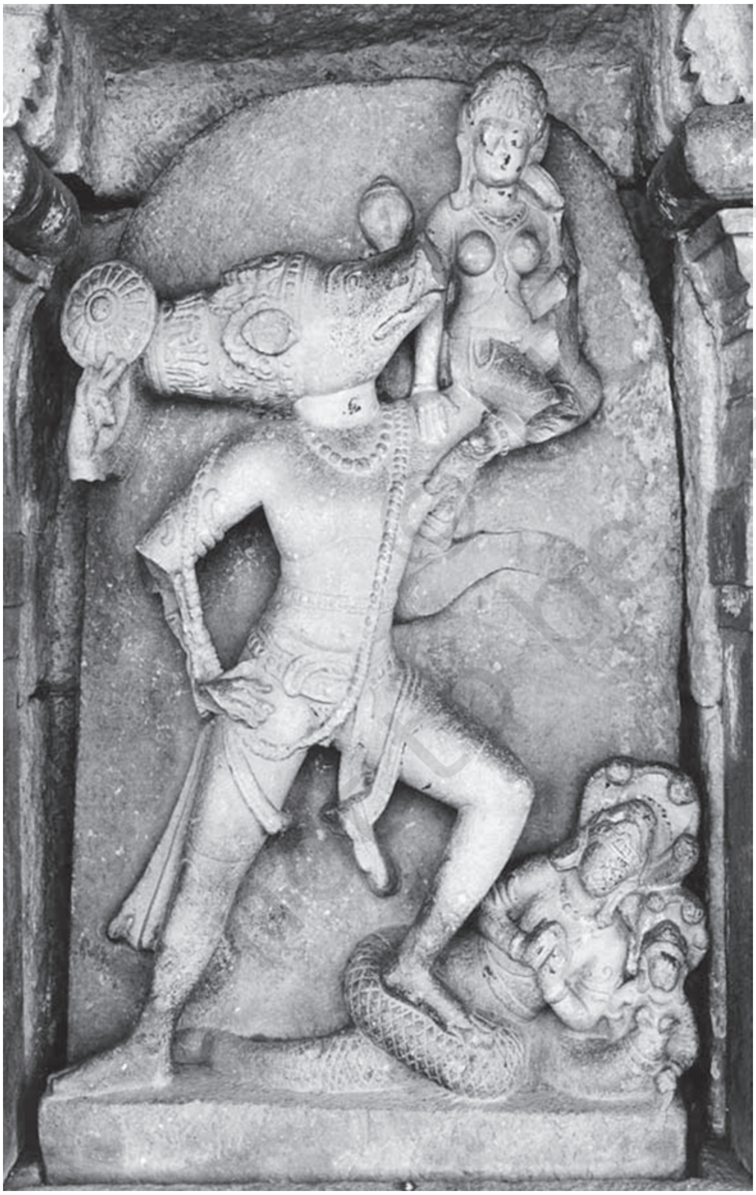


10.2 The growth of Puranic Hinduism

The notion of a saviour was not unique to Buddhism. We find similar ideas being developed in different ways within traditions that we now consider part of Hinduism. These included Vaishnavism (a form of Hinduism within which Vishnu was worshipped as the principal deity) and Shaivism (a tradition within which Shiva was regarded as the chief god), in which there was growing emphasis on the worship of a chosen deity. In such worship the bond between the devotee and the god was visualised as one of love and devotion, or bhakti.

Fig. 4.23
The Varaha or boar avatar of Vishnu rescuing the earth goddess, Aihole (Karnataka) c. *sixth century* CE

➲ What does the proportion of the figures suggest?



In the case of Vaishnavism, cults developed around the various avatars or incarnations of the deity. Ten avatars were recognised within the tradition. These were forms that the deity was believed to have assumed in order to save the world whenever it was threatened by disorder and destruction because of the dominance of evil forces. It is likely that different avatars were popular in different parts of the country. Recognising each of these local deities as a form of Vishnu was one way of creating a more unified religious tradition.

Some of these forms were represented in sculptures, as were other deities. Shiva, for instance, was symbolised by the *linga*, although he was occasionally represented in human form too. All such representations depicted a complex set of ideas about the deities and their attributes through symbols such as head-dresses, ornaments and *ayudhas* – weapons or auspicious objects the deities hold in their hands – how they are seated, etc.

To understand the meanings of these sculptures historians

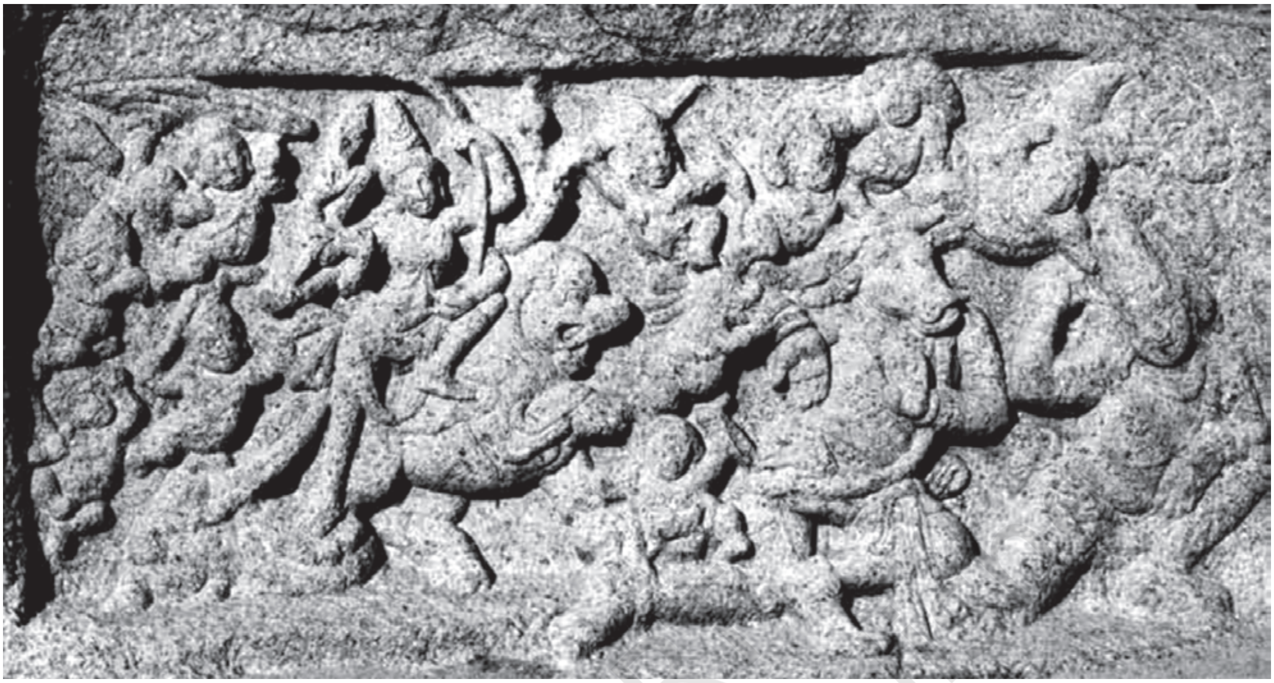


Fig. 4.24
An image of Durga, Mahabalipuram (Tamil Nadu), c. sixth century CE

➲ Identify the ways in which the artists have depicted movement. Find out more about the story depicted in this sculpture.

have to be familiar with the stories behind them – many of which are contained in the Puranas, compiled by Brahmanas (by about the middle of the first millennium CE). They contained much that had been composed and been in circulation for centuries, including stories about gods and goddesses. Generally, they were written in simple Sanskrit verse, and were meant to be read aloud to everybody, including women and Shudras, who did not have access to Vedic learning.

Much of what is contained in the Puranas evolved through interaction amongst people – priests, merchants, and ordinary men and women who travelled from place to place sharing ideas and beliefs. We know for instance that Vasudeva-Krishna was an important deity in the Mathura region. Over centuries, his worship spread to other parts of the country as well.

10.3 Building temples

Around the time that the stupas at sites such as Sanchi were acquiring their present form, the first temples to house images of gods and goddesses were also being built. The early temple was a small square room, called the *garbhagriha*, with a single doorway for the worshipper to enter and offer worship to the image. Gradually, a tall structure, known as the

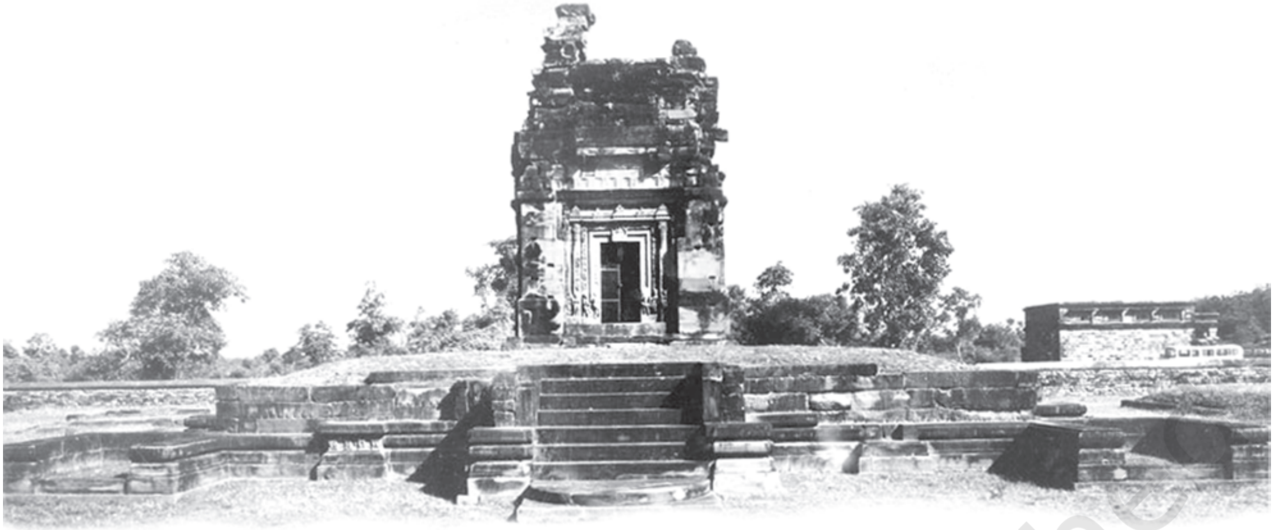


Fig. 4.25
A temple in Deogarh (Uttar Pradesh), c. *fifth century* CE

➲ Identify the remains of the *shikhara* and the entrance to the *garbhagriha.*

shikhara, was built over the central shrine. Temple walls were often decorated with sculpture. Later temples became far more elaborate – with assembly halls, huge walls and gateways, and arrangements for supplying water (see also Chapter 7).

One of the unique features of early temples was that some of these were hollowed out of huge rocks, as artificial caves. The tradition of building artificial caves was an old one. Some of the earliest (Fig. 4.27)

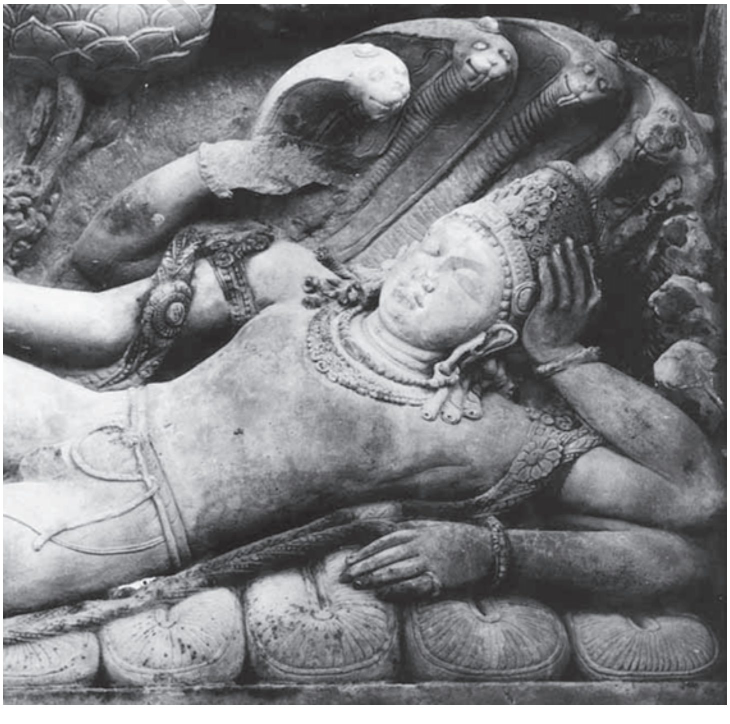


Fig. 4.26
Vishnu reclining on the serpent Sheshnag, sculpture from Deogarh (Uttar Pradesh), c. *fifth century* CE

of these were constructed in the third century BCE on the orders of Asoka for renouncers who belonged to the Ajivika sect.

This tradition evolved through various stages and culminated much later – in the eighth century – in the carving out of an entire temple, that of Kailashnatha (a name of Shiva).

A copperplate inscription records the amazement of the chief sculptor after he completed the temple at Ellora: "Oh how did I make it!"

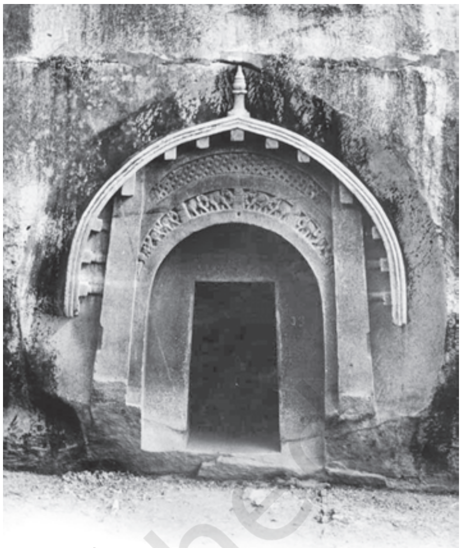


Fig. 4.27
Entrance to a cave at Barabar (Bihar), c. third century BCE

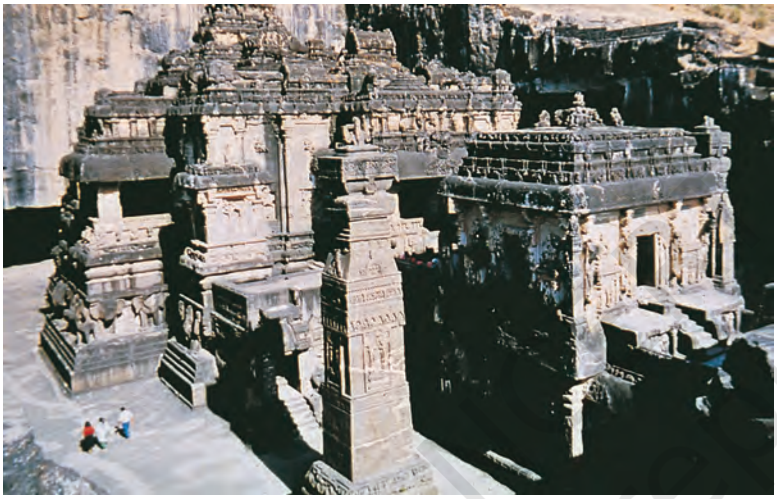


Fig. 4.28
Kailashnatha Temple, Ellora (Maharashtra). This entire structure is carved out of a single piece of rock.

11. CAN WE "SEE" EVERYTHING?

By now you have had a glimpse of the rich visual traditions that existed in the past – expressed in brick and stone architecture, sculpture and painting. We have seen that much has been destroyed and lost over the centuries. Nevertheless, what remains and has been preserved conveys a sense of the vision of the artists, sculptors, masons and architects who created these spectacular works. Yet, do we always automatically understand what they wanted to convey? Can we ever know what these images meant to people who saw them and venerated them about 2,000 years ago?

11.1 Grappling with the unfamiliar

It will be useful to recall that when nineteenth-century European scholars first saw some of the sculptures of gods and goddesses, they could not understand what these were about. Sometimes, they were horrified by what seemed to them grotesque figures, with multiple arms and heads or with combinations of human and animal forms.

These early scholars tried to make sense of what appeared to be strange images by comparing them with sculpture with which they were familiar, that from ancient Greece. While they often found early Indian sculpture inferior to the works of Greek artists, they were very excited when they discovered images of the Buddha and Bodhisattas that were evidently based on Greek models. These were, more often than not, found in the northwest, in cities such as Taxila and Peshawar, where Indo-Greek rulers had established kingdoms in the second century BCE. As these images were closest to the Greek statues these scholars were familiar with, they were considered to be the best examples of early Indian art. In effect, these scholars adopted a strategy we all frequently use – devising yardsticks derived from the familiar to make sense of the unfamiliar.

11.2 If text and image do not match ...

Consider another problem. We have seen that art historians often draw upon textual traditions to understand the meaning of sculptures. While this is certainly a far more efficacious strategy than comparing Indian images with Greek statues, it is not always easy to use. One of the most intriguing examples of this is a famous sculpture along a huge rock surface in Mahabalipuram (Tamil Nadu).

Clearly, Fig. 4.30 is a vivid depiction of a story. But which story is it? Art historians have searched through the Puranas to identify it and are sharply divided in their opinions. Some feel that this depicts the descent of the river Ganga from heaven – the

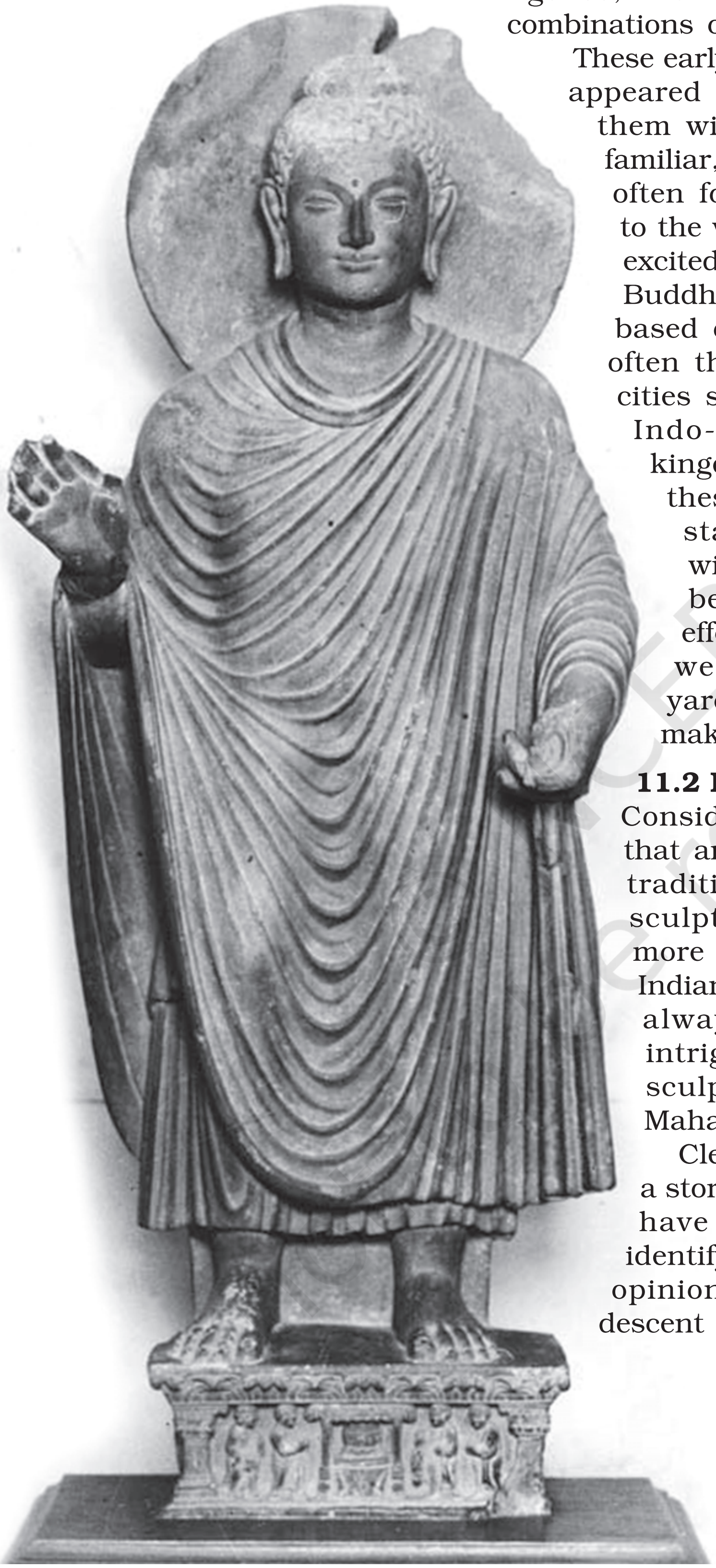


Fig. 4.29
A Bodhisatta from Gandhara
Note the clothes and the hairstyle.

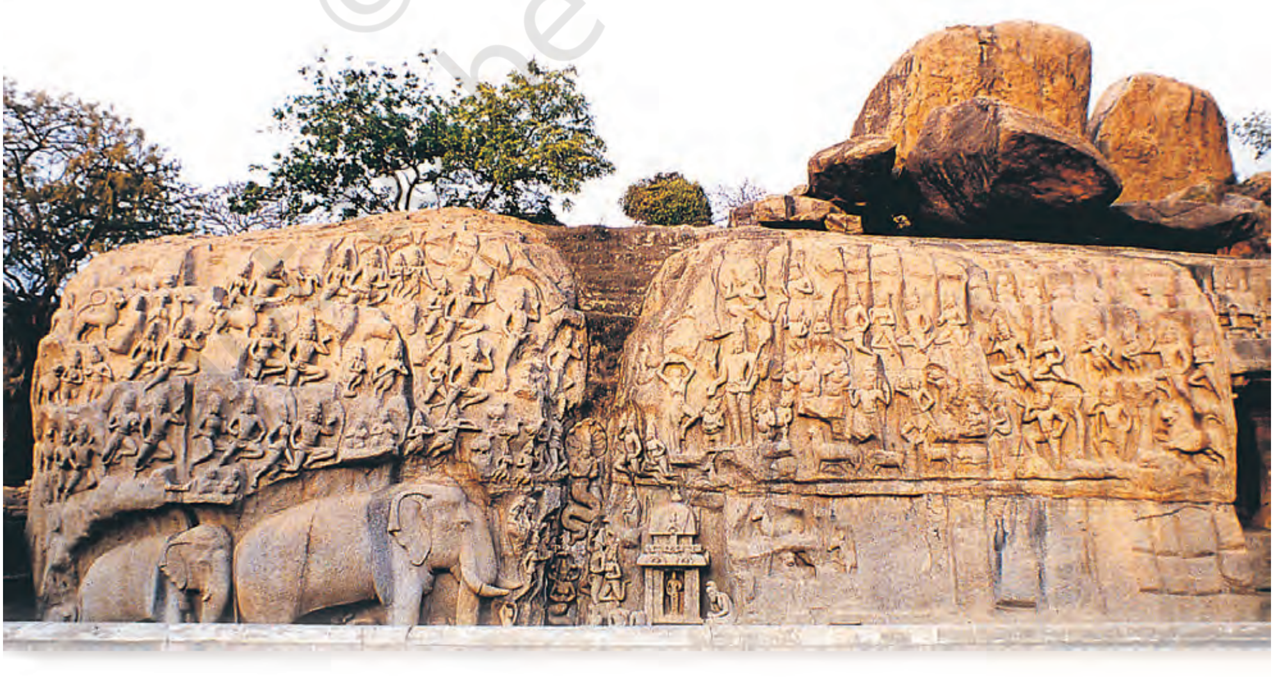
natural cleft through the centre of the rock surface might represent the river. The story itself is narrated in the Puranas and the epics. Others feel that it represents a story from the *Mahabharata* – Arjuna doing penance on the river bank in order to acquire arms – pointing to the central figure of an ascetic.

Finally, remember that many rituals, religious beliefs and practices were not recorded in a permanent, visible form – as monuments, or sculpture, or even paintings. These included daily practices, as well as those associated with special occasions. Many communities and peoples may not have felt the need for keeping lasting records, even as they may have had vibrant traditions of religious activities and philosophical ideas. In fact, the spectacular instances we have focused on in this chapter are just the tip of the iceberg.

➲ Discuss...

Describe any religious activity you have seen.
Is it permanently recorded in any form?

Fig. 4.30
A rock-cut sculptural panel at Mahabalipuram



TIMELINE 1

MAJOR RELIGIOUS DEVELOPMENTS

c. 1500-1000 BCE	Early Vedic traditions
c. 1000-500 BCE	Later Vedic traditions
c. sixth century BCE	Early Upanishads; Jainism, Buddhism
c. third century BCE	First stupas
c. second century BCE onwards	Development of Mahayana Buddhism, Vaishnavism, Shaivism and goddess cults
c. third century CE	Earliest temples

TIMELINE 2

LANDMARKS IN THE DISCOVERY AND PRESERVATION OF EARLY MONUMENTS AND SCULPTURE

Nineteenth century	
1814	Founding of the Indian Museum, Calcutta
1834	Publication of *Essay on the Architecture of the Hindus*, by Ram Raja; Cunningham explores the stupa at Sarnath
1835-1842	James Fergusson surveys major archaeological sites
1851	Establishment of the Government Museum, Madras
1854	Alexander Cunningham publishes *Bhilsa Topes*, one of the earliest works on Sanchi
1878	Rajendra Lala Mitra publishes *Buddha Gaya: The Heritage of Sakya Muni*
1880	H.H. Cole appointed Curator of Ancient Monuments
1888	Passing of the Treasure Trove Act, giving the government the right to acquire all objects of archaeological interest
Twentieth century	
1914	John Marshall and Alfred Foucher publish *The Monuments of Sanchi*
1923	John Marshall publishes the *Conservation Manual*
1955	Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru lays the foundation stone of the National Museum, New Delhi
1989	Sanchi declared a World Heritage Site

Answer in 100-150 words

1. Were the ideas of the Upanishadic thinkers different from those of the fatalists and materialists? Give reasons for your answer.
2. Summarise the central teachings of Jainism.
3. Discuss the role of the begums of Bhopal in preserving the stupa at Sanchi.
4. Read this short inscription and answer:

   In the year 33 of the *maharaja* Huvishka (a Kushana ruler), in the first month of the hot season on the eighth day, a Bodhisatta was set up at Madhuvanaka by the *bhikkhuni* Dhanavati, the sister's daughter of the *bhikkhuni* Buddhamita, who knows the *Tipitaka*, the female pupil of the *bhikkhu* Bala, who knows the *Tipitaka,* together with her father and mother.

   (a) How did Dhanavati date her inscription?

   (b) Why do you think she installed an image of the Bodhisatta?

   (c) Who were the relatives she mentioned?

   (d) What Buddhist text did she know?

   (e) From whom did she learn this text?
5. Why do you think women and men joined the *sangha?*

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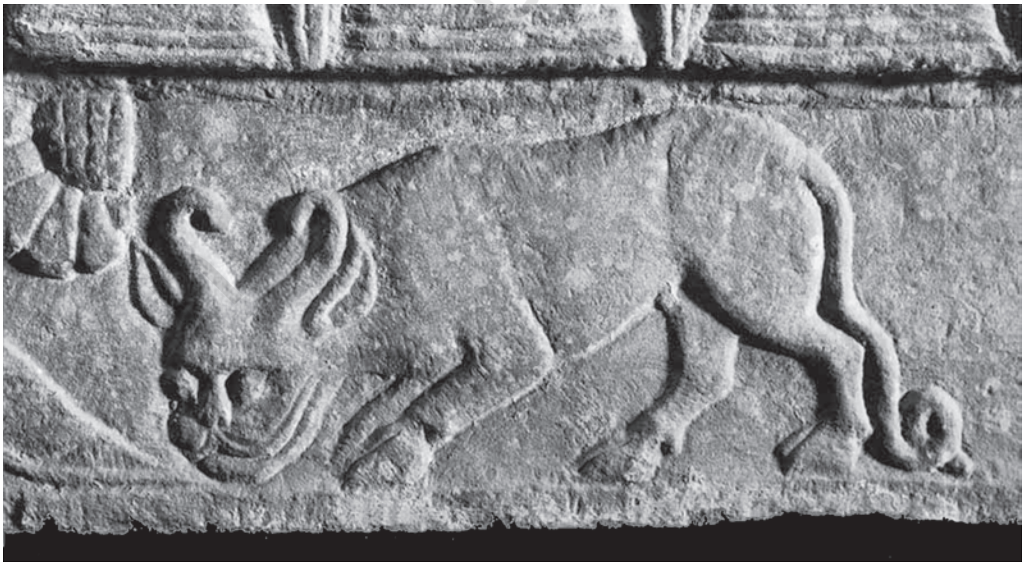


Fig. 4.31
A sculpture in Sanchi

WRITE A SHORT ESSAY (ABOUT 500 WORDS) ON THE FOLLOWING:

6. To what extent does knowledge of Buddhist literature help in understanding the sculpture at Sanchi?

7. Figs. 4.32 and 4.33 are two scenes from Sanchi. Describe what you see in each of them, focusing on the architecture, plants and animals, and the activities. Identify which one shows a rural scene and which an urban scene, giving reasons for your answer.

8. Discuss the development in sculpture and architecture associated with the rise of Vaishnavism and Shaivism.

9. Discuss how and why stupas were built.

Fig. 4.32

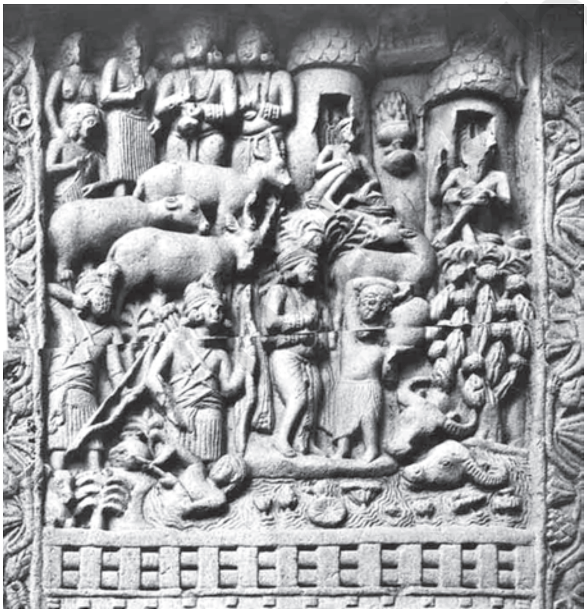
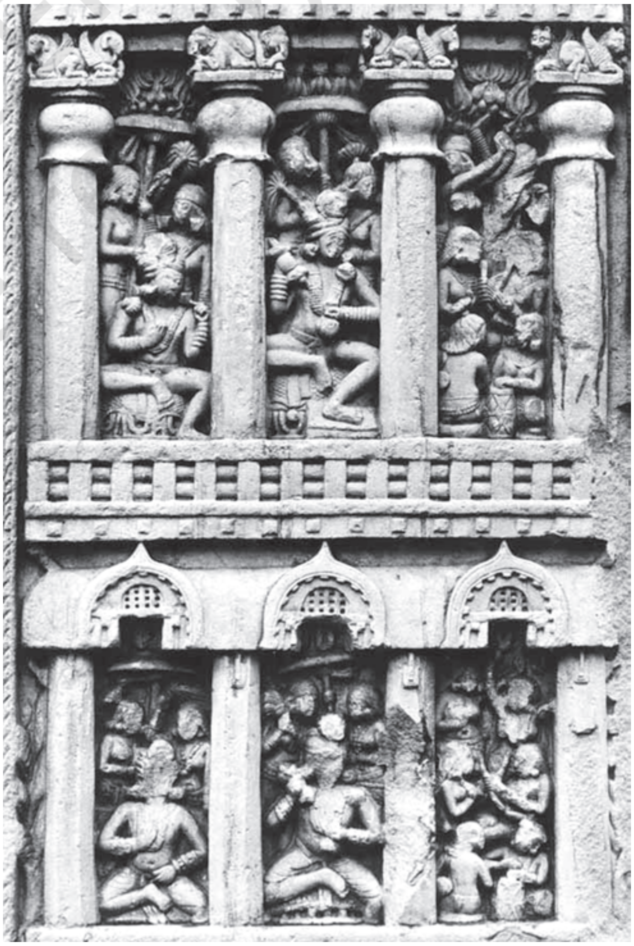


Fig. 4.33



MAP WORK

10. On an outline world map, mark the areas to which Buddhism spread. Trace the land and sea routes from the subcontinent to these areas.

PROJECT (ANY ONE)

11. Of the religious traditions discussed in this chapter, is there any that is practised in your neighbourhood? What are the religious texts used today, and how are they preserved and transmitted? Are images used in worship? If so, are these similar to or different from those described in this chapter? Describe the buildings used for religious activities today, comparing them with early stupas and temples.

12. Collect at least five pictures of sculpture or painting, belonging to different periods and regions, on the religious traditions described in this chapter. Remove their captions, and show each one to two people, and ask them to describe what they see. Compare their descriptions and prepare a report on your findings.

If you would like to know more, read:

A.L. Basham. 1985.
The Wonder that was India.
Rupa, Calcutta.

N.N. Bhattacharyya. 1996.
Indian Religious Historiography.
Munshiram Manoharlal,
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Oxford University Press,
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Richard F. Gombrich. 1988.
Theravada Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo. Routledge and Kegan Paul, London.

Benjamin Rowland. 1967.
The Art and Architecture of India: Buddhist/Hindu/Jain.
Penguin Books,
Harmondsworth.

For more information, you could visit:
http://dsal.uchicago.edu/images/aiis/

Credits for Illustrations

Theme 1

Fig.1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, 1.5, 1.6, 1.8, 1.11, 1.12, 1.13, 1.14, 1.15, 1.16, 1.20, 1.22, 1.23, 1.26, 1.28, 1.29, Fig 1.30 of exercises:
Archaeological Survey of India and National Museum, New Delhi
Fig. 1.7, 1.9, 1.10, 1.17, 1.18, 1.19, 1.21, 1.24:
Prof. Gregory L. Possehl
Fig. 1.27:
Centre for Cultural Resources and Training, New Delhi

Theme 2

Fig. 2.1: American Institute of Indian Studies, Gurgaon
Fig. 2.2, 2.6: Archaeological Survey of India
Fig. 2.3, 2.5, 2.10:
Centre for Cultural Resources and Training, New Delhi
Fig. 2.4, 2.7, 2.9, 2.12, 2.13: National Museum, New Delhi
Fig. 2.8: Wikipedia

Theme 3

Fig. 3.1, 3.10: Archaeological Survey of India
Fig. 3.3, 3.4, 3.5, 3.6, 3.7, 3.8, 3.9: National Museum, New Delhi

Theme 4

Fig. 4.1, 4.5, 4.8, 4.9, 4.12, 4.13, 4.14, 4.15, 4.16, 4.17, 4.18, 4.19, 4.21, 4.22, 4.23, 4.24, 4.25, 4.26, 4.27, 4.29, 4.31, fig 4.32 and 33 in exercise:
American Institute of Indian Studies, Gurgaon
Fig. 4.2: Wikipedia
Fig. 4.3, 4.11, 4.28, 4.30:
Centre for Cultural Resources and Training, New Delhi
Fig. 4.4, 4.6, 4.7, 4.20: National Museum, New Delhi